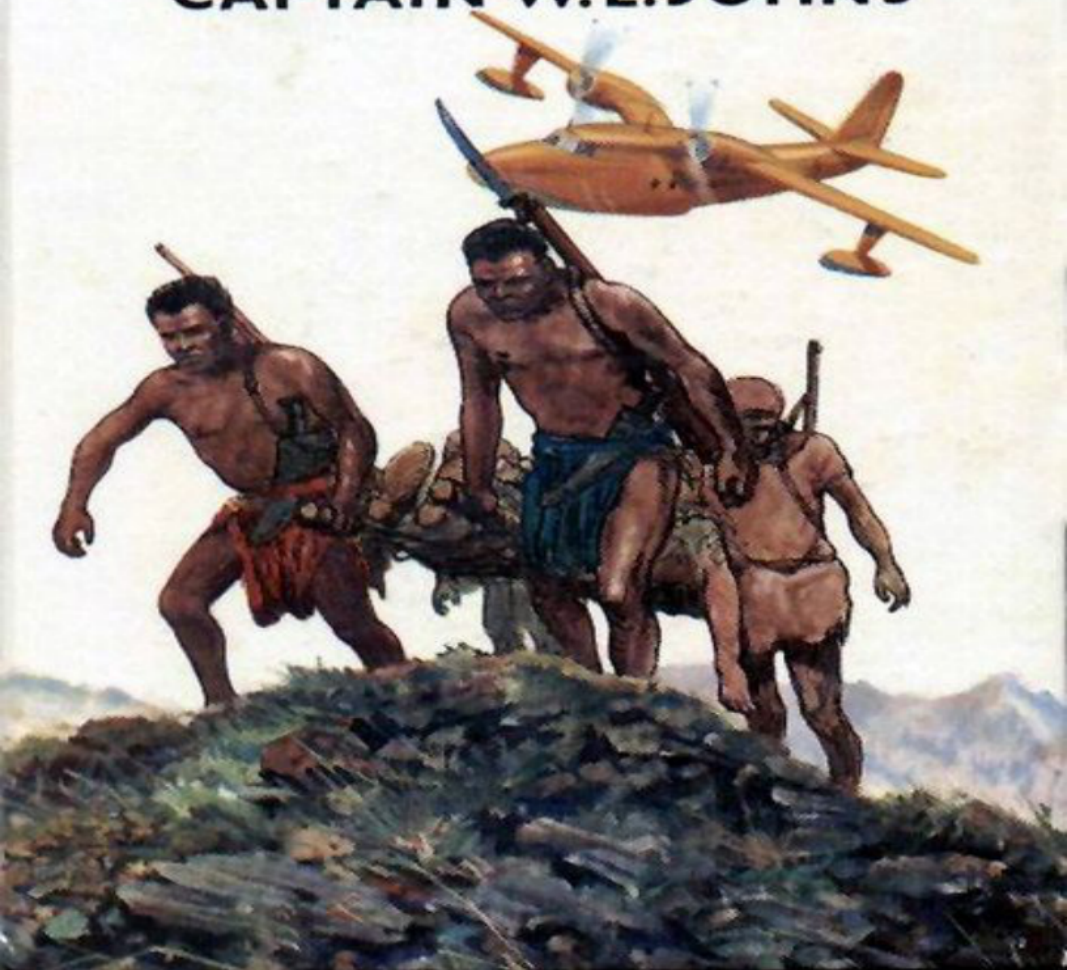


Biggles

GOES HOME

CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS



CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: PRELUDE TO ADVENTURE

CHAPTER II: A TOUGH PROPOSITION

CHAPTER III: THE START

CHAPTER IV: NOTHING DOING

CHAPTER V: AN UNEXPECTED CHANCE

CHAPTER VI: TIGER!

CHAPTER VII: TROUBLES AT THE LAKE

CHAPTER VIII: GINGER DROPS IN

CHAPTER IX: DEATH IN THE NULLAH

CHAPTER X: HOT WORK

CHAPTER XI: BIGGLES ARRIVES

CHAPTER XII: WHAT NEXT?

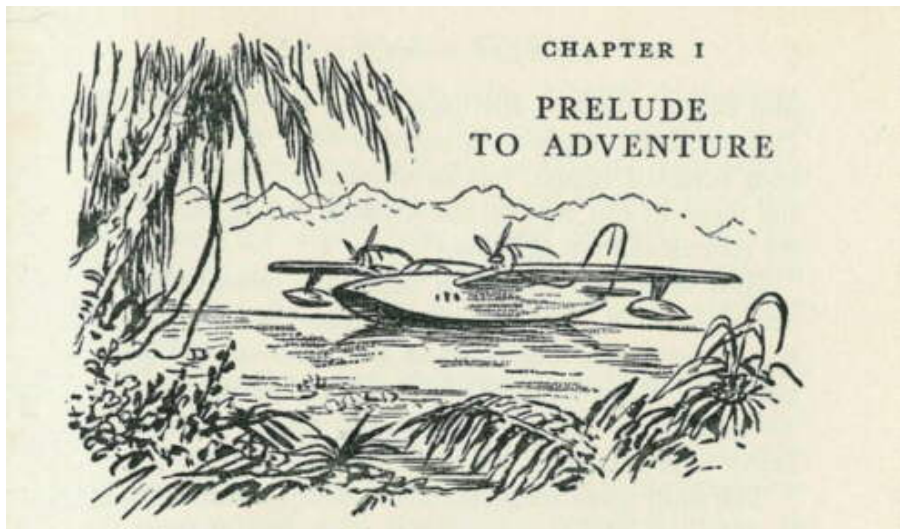
CHAPTER XIII: A WAITING GAME

CHAPTER XIV: HAMID KHAN SHOWS HOW

CHAPTER XV: A GOOD DAY'S WORK

CHAPTER XVI: THE FINAL SHOCK

CHAPTER I



THE hour was that expectant moment between the false dawn and the true: that fleeting interval of time between the death of the moon and stars and the birth of the sun: those few heart-searching seconds when all nature seems to hold its breath as it waits in twilight for the miracle of another day.

The world lay in a trance, as if on the brink of eternity. The silence was profound. No bird sang. No insect hummed. No reptile croaked. The uneasy sounds of the jungle night had died away; those of the sunlit hours had not begun. Nothing stirred; not a cloud in the sky, not a leaf on a tree nor a ripple on the lonely lake called Timbi Tso. The drooping fronds of the palms, bowing to their reflections in the water, might have been the painted wooden dummies of a stage set.

The dawn marched nearer, the sun, victorious as always, even though it had not yet shown its face, driving out the last reluctant shades of night.

Knee deep in maidenhair fern Police Pilot "Ginger" Hebblethwaite, clad in an open-necked tunic shirt and shorts, stood on the edge of the lake near the Air Police *Gadfly* amphibious aircraft that floated on its own inverted image, lost in wonder at the beauty of the scene as one by one the seconds passed, to be lost for ever in the sea of Time.

Half veiled in a tenuous mist that contributed an atmosphere of mystery, the picture before him, a harmonious blending of blues and mauves and greys, had more the quality of a dream than factual reality. To add further gratification to the senses the air was heavy with a sweet if rather sickly fragrance.

The light grew stronger. The water gleamed, translucent, with those elusive hues of mother-of-pearl for which no name has yet been found. It might have

been a mirror, a sheet of lustre glass, blown by the spirits of the forest which surrounded it, the trees reflecting in it with startling fidelity their every detail. Floating on its surface here and there were the big flat plates of water-lily leaves, the flowers upturned like gold and silver chalices to catch the dew.

Fringing the lake, enclosing it like the walls of a prison designed to keep it for ever in seclusion, was a riot of vegetation not of this world. Some of the trees had trunks and branches of pink and white, so unnatural as to strain credulity. From one that had fallen in the water a spray of orchids sprang like an orange flame. Another had leaves like Indian rugs. The fronds of tree-ferns, six feet long, formed arching curves as if, too long confined, they had burst like rockets to gain their freedom. Over some of them laburnum had hung its golden chains. The pale green lances of bamboos, with their narrow swordlike foliage, stood in close-packed groups as if for mutual protection.

Far, far away, a hundred miles or more, high above the northern confines of the lake, depending as it seemed from heaven itself, ran a ghostly fringe which Ginger knew was some of the nearer Himalayan giants that roof the world; the sacred peaks of Triscul, Kedarath and Badrinath, which, as some hillmen believe, are the homes of the gods that rule the universe.

The sun announced its arrival with lances of white light thrust deep into the heart of a sky of eggshell blue, shivering it into pink. The rim of its disc rose above the horizon and it was day. With it the breathless moment passed and the jungle breathed again. A peacock, a living jewel as the rays of light touched its turquoise and purple breast, rose suddenly. It settled on the branch of a tree and from that safe perch, with its crested head held over sideways, eyed the ground with obvious suspicion. Near by an unseen monkey chattered, scolding.

The cause of the disturbance soon appeared. From behind a thicket of *madar* scrub, mauve and white with its poisonous blossoms, with lordly bearing and easy gait stepped a tiger, calm and confident, making no more noise in its passage than a fish swimming in deep water. It stopped abruptly in mid-step, one paw raised, as if sensing the presence of the man, and looked directly at him. Ginger met its gaze. He did not move. He made no sound. Neither did the tiger.

For a few seconds the black and yellow monarch of the jungle regarded the man with evident surprise, and then, with casual indifference, walked on, to disappear like a passing shadow into the gloomy depths of the everlasting forest.

Ginger breathed again. Not that he had been particularly afraid, either because the animal had shown no sign of hostility or because it had seemed to fit so perfectly into the picture. Picking up the can of water he had been to the lake to fetch for the early morning tea he went on to a small, square-shaped tent that had been pitched in a little open space a dozen yards from the shore of the lake.

"There's a tiger outside," he announced, as he put down the can.

Biggles yawned, stretched, and sat up on the blanket on which he had been sleeping. "What was he doing?" he inquired, without showing any great interest.

"Nothing in particular, as far as I could make out. Just having his morning constitutional from the way he was strolling."

"Probably looking for his breakfast. He won't trouble us if we don't try any tricks on him. Normal tigers like men no more than normal men like tigers."

"I hope you're right," returned Ginger, dubiously. "I, for one, shall do my best to keep out of his way."

"What's the weather like?" Biggles lit a cigarette.

"Fine. It's broad daylight, so get weaving. I'm making the tea."

From which it may be gathered that to Ginger had fallen the lot of the dawn guard.

He touched Algy and Bertie, who had not moved, with his foot. "Show a leg there," he ordered. "You're burning daylight."

A minute later he nearly dropped the teapot when the quiet that had fallen was shattered by a roar, not far away, so frightful that Algy and Bertie leapt from their blankets like twin Jack-in-the-boxes.

The roar was repeated, blended now with a squeal of fury and a crashing of bushes.

"Oh here! I say, chaps! Dash it all. Who's doing that? Where's the rifle! And I've dropped my bally eyeglass." All this was in one breath as Bertie, in his pyjamas, shook his blanket.

Biggles was sitting on his own blanket, his face in his hands, rocking with silent laughter at the panic the uproar had created.

"What's so funny?" inquired Ginger, indignantly. His face had lost some of its colour.

"You," replied Biggles, looking up and wiping tears of mirth from his eyes. The noise outside continued.

"But that's a tiger," declared Ginger. "I saw it. I told you."

"Of course it's a tiger. What do you think I thought it was—a mouse? Pour me a cup of tea."

"Aren't you going to do anything about it?"

"Not me. What do you take me for? He's not concerned with us."

"It sounds to me as if he's mightily concerned with something," muttered Algy, glancing at the flimsy fabric of the tent as the roaring and snarling went on in a sort of mounting frenzy.

"He's only concerned with the same thing as I am, and that is some breakfast. How about it?"

"Do you mean all that fuss is because he's looking for food?"

"No. The fuss is because he's found it, and by now he's wishing he hadn't—the silly fool."

"What has he found—an elephant?"

“No. A porcupine, and believe you me he’s wishing he’d taken on something easier. Even though it’s his favourite dish I’ve never been able to understand why a tiger knocks his pan out and ruins his temper by fooling with a porcupine.”

“Are you asking me to believe that a thing like a porcupine has a hope against a tiger?” asked Ginger, incredulously.

“Please yourself, but you can take it from me that old Porky can put up a pretty good show. I’d lay my money on him every time. All the same, it’s a pity this had to happen just outside our front door.”

“Why?”

“Because by the time Mr. Stripes throws in the sponge he’ll be in such a foul temper that he’s likely to have a crack at anything he sees moving, and that may be me or you.”

“I don’t get it,” growled Ginger.

“All right. If you’ll quit stalling and pass me a mug of tea I’ll try to explain. As I’ve said, if there’s one thing that makes a tiger smack his lips it’s the thought of some succulent porcupine chops. There are plenty of porcupines about, but unfortunately for him they’re not so easy to get on the plate.”

“I don’t see why.”

“You will if you ever try it yourself. You see, a full grown porky is very well equipped in the matter of armament. He’s as well protected as a tank. On his back and tail—quite a heavy tail, by the way—he sports about fifteen hundred quills, black with white tips, each one having a nasty little barb on it.”

“I know. I’ve used ‘em as floats, for fishing.”

“Usually, the first thing that happens when the tiger makes his pounce, he’s pulled up short by a smack in the face with a tail-piece loaded with little spears, some of which stick. That makes him holler—as you may have noticed. It puts him in such a passion that he goes completely round the bend and regardless of consequences fetches old Porky a swipe with a bunch of claws. All he gets for that is a fistful of quills, and from the row he kicks up they must hurt. You would think he’d now have the sense to stand back and do a spot of hard thinking. But no. He goes completely daft and tries using his teeth, which are capable of dealing with most things. But not old Porky. All he gets for that silly show of temper is a mouthful of barbs, so that by this time he’s beginning to look as much like a pincushion as old Porky himself. Sometimes the porcupine gets away with it, sometimes he doesn’t; but whichever way the argument ends one thing is certain; the tiger may get his chops, but he has to pay such a price for ‘em that he must wish he’d gone in for fish and chips instead.”

“What does he do about the quills he’s collected?”

“No doubt he manages to get most of ‘em out; but not all; there may be some stuck in places he can’t get at. If they turn septic, as they may, he’s in a

proper mess, limping about unable to get a bite of anything, every step a groan. Imagine how you'd feel if you had to hunt for your dinner with a row of fish-hooks in the soles of your feet and no hands to get 'em out."

"All right. I don't see any need to burst into tears about it," remarked Algy, coldly. "Whose fault is it, anyway?"

Biggles ignored the interruption. "Hopping mad with pain and hunger, that's when he becomes really dangerous, ready to have a crack at anything. Some old hunters believe this is one of the reasons why a tiger turns man-eater, which in the ordinary way he isn't. He prefers to keep clear of men. But when he can't get anything else, noticing maybe that a native doesn't have quills, he grabs him, or her, as the case may be. Finding the meat soft and juicy and easy to come by he comes back for more, and if something isn't done to stop him he may wipe out a whole village. Anyhow, now you know what was going on outside. On this occasion I fancy Porky won the round."

The noise outside had subsided to deep-throated growls.

"I'd say that's him trying to get the thorns out of his pads," went on Biggles. "Had he killed the porky he'd be purring like the cat he is."

"It won't be very comfortable here with that devil on the prowl," said Ginger.

"I shall soon know if he's about."

"How?"

"My nose will tell me. Like most carnivora a tiger stinks. Down wind you can smell him quite a way off."

"How does the tiger get on with the elephant?" Bertie wanted to know. "Old Jumbo should keep him going for a bit."

"You mean the wild elephants that live in the forest?"

"Yes."

"For the most part they seem to regard each other with respect. The wild elephant is afraid of only two things; men and fire. Unless he happens to be a rogue he'll run from either. When he's moving away from a man he's like a shadow flitting through the trees, and he makes no more noise than one. Which is something you couldn't do. How he does it is a mystery. Of course, he makes plenty of noise when he's feeding, pulling down branches and even small trees. But never mind about tigers and elephants. We've a job to do, and we'd better see about getting on with it."

* * *

Now let us turn the calendar back a month to learn what this job was, and why the Air Police *Gadfly* amphibian was moored on a remote lake on the northeast frontier of India.

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER II A TOUGH PROPOSITION



"TELL me, Bigglesworth, where were you born?" Air Commodore Raymond, head of the Special Air Police at Scotland Yard, put the question to his senior operational pilot who, at his request, had just entered his office.

"That's a bit unexpected," answered Biggles, pulling up a chair to the near side of his chief's desk. "India. I thought you knew that."

"Yes, of course I knew. I should have been more explicit. Where exactly in India?"

Biggles smiled faintly. "I first opened my peepers in the *dak* bungalow at Chini, in Garhwal, in the northern district of the United Provinces."

"How did that come about?"

"My father had left the army and entered the Indian Civil Service. He was for a time Assistant Commissioner at Garhwal and with my mother was on a routine visit to Chini when, as I learned later, I arrived somewhat prematurely. However, just having been whitewashed inside and out, the bungalow was nice and clean, and I managed to survive."

"How long were you there?"

"In the United Provinces? About twelve years. Then, as I was getting recurring bouts of fever I was sent home to give my blood a chance to thicken. I lived with an uncle, who had a place in Norfolk."

"Do you remember anything of Garhwal?"

"One doesn't forget the place where one spent the first twelve years of one's life."

"Did you like it there?"

"I loved every moment of it. After all, what more could a boy ask for? Elephants to ride on, peacocks in the trees and rivers stiff with fish."

"You never went back?"

"I didn't get a chance. I was at school when the first war started, and by the time it was over my people were dead."

"You remember the country pretty well?"

"If it hasn't changed, and I don't suppose it has. When I say I know it I mean as well as any white boy could know it—that is, the tracks from one place to another. I doubt if anyone could get to know the jungle itself. The *bharbar*, as they call it, the forest jungle that covers the whole of the lower slopes of the eastern Himalayas, is pretty solid, and I reckon it'll be the last place on earth to be tamed."

"You did some hunting, I believe."

"Yes. My father believed in boys making an early start. I used to go out with him and an old *shikari* who taught me tracking, and so on."

"Ever get a tiger?"

"No, but one nearly got me."

"It must have been a dangerous place for a boy."

"Oh, I don't know. It's a matter of familiarity. Here, people are killed on the roads every day but that doesn't keep us at home. The first thing the Italians, who live on the slopes of Vesuvius, do, every morning, is glance up at the volcano to see if it looks like blowing its top. The first thing I did when I got out of bed was turn my mosquito boots upside down to make sure a *krait* hadn't roosted in one of 'em. Thousands of Indians are killed every year by snakes but that doesn't make people afraid to go out. As a matter of fact a twelve-foot *hamadryad* lived in our garden. He didn't worry us so we left him alone because he kept down the rats and ate any other snake that trespassed on his preserves. Here you get used to traffic; there you get used to snakes, tigers, bears and panthers, if you leave the beaten track. If I was scared of anything it was the Bhotiyas—not the tribesmen themselves, but their dogs. The men come down the mountains with sheep and goats which they use as beasts of burden to carry loads of wool and borax. The dogs, enormous hounds like shaggy mastiffs, wearing spiked collars, are trained to protect the herds from bears and panthers, but they're just as likely to go for you. No. Malaria, the sort called jungle fever, is the real danger. Sooner or later it gets you. It got me."

"Do you remember the language?"

"Probably. I had friends among the Garhwalis and Kumoan hillmen so I picked up quite a bit of their lingo. I can still speak Hindi and Urdu although it's some time since I had occasion to use either." Biggles' eyes suddenly clouded with suspicion. "Here. Wait a minute. What's all this about."

"I was wondering if you'd care to go back."

"You mean—for a holiday?"

"Well—er—not exactly."

Biggles nodded. "So that's it. I should have guessed there was a trick in it. Before we go any further how about explaining this sudden interest in India?"

"I'm coining to that. I was just sounding you out to find out how much you

knew about the country. We've just learned that a very good friend of ours is somewhere in the jungle of Garhwal, sick, and we'd like to have him brought here."

"Presumably by me?"

"Of course."

"Where exactly is he?"

"I don't know."

Biggles' eyes opened wide. "You don't *know*?"

"All I know is, he's hiding in the jungle."

Biggles looked incredulous. "And I'm supposed to find him?"

"Yes."

"Oh, have a heart, sir," protested Biggles. "The jungle you're talking about covers five thousand square miles. An army could blunder about in it for years without finding a place the size of this building. There's nowhere to land, anyway. The only spots of open ground are tea gardens and millet fields. I believe there is now an airfield in the province, at Moradabad, but what's the use of that?"

The Air Commodore raised a hand. "All right. Don't get in a flap. Things are not quite as bad as they may seem. Sit quietly with a cigarette while I tell you all about it. This is the story. The name of the man with whom we're concerned is a Mr. Poo Tah Ling. We can call him simply Mr. Poo."

Biggles raised his eyebrows. "Chinese?"

"Correct."

"A British agent?"

"No."

"What's he doing there?"

"That's what I'm going to tell you if you'll let me."

"Sorry."

"There was a time, before the Communists took over China, when Mr. Poo was one of the most important merchants in Shanghai—or, for that matter, in China. In that capacity he knew personally many British merchants trading with the Far East. To some he was a close friend. He was one of those Chinese who are a hundred per cent trustworthy. His word was sacred and he was never known to break it. Talking yesterday to a man who knew him well he told me that although some of the deals he put through involved a great amount of money there was never a contract. Nothing was put in writing, for to Mr. Poo that would have implied distrust. What he said he'd pay, he paid, and that was that."

Biggles nodded. "I've heard of such Chinese. Pity some of our people can't take a leaf out of Mr. Poo's book."

"As you say. Well, the troubles of Mr. Poo began when the country fell to the Communists. He was a rich man, and that of course was enough to put him on the spot as a detestable capitalist. The fact that he had made his money by honest trading in imports and exports made no difference. Knowing what

his fate would be he put a few of his most treasured possessions in a sack—he was a collector of rare jade— and dressed as a peasant he set off, on foot, up the Tsangpo river for Thibet. For a man of sixty that was no light undertaking. However, he made it and settled down, as he thought, to spend the rest of his days in quiet retirement on the plateau which is sometimes called the top of the world—Thibet.”

“Why did he go to Thibet? Why not Formosa, where so many refugees went? He’d have been safe there.”

“We know that now, since the Americans have occupied the island; but it was not so obvious then. He was a proud man and apparently decided to go it alone.”

“What was wrong with Hong Kong?”

The Air Commodore shrugged. “I don’t know. He may have thought it would embarrass the British Government if he asked for political asylum. After all, he was, or had been, a rich man, and the Communists would be after him for his wealth. But why he went to Thibet is not important. He probably thought it was the safest place. Well, you know what has happened there. The Chinese Communist armies have marched in and occupied the country, making themselves secure by liquidating half the population. Again the unfortunate Mr. Poo, to save his life, had to flit. He made for the Himalayas and the frontier of India. That’s how he got to Garhwal.”

“A lot of Thibetans got to India. Why didn’t he follow the Dalai Lama’s party?”

“He couldn’t very well do that.”

“Why not?”

“Think! They were Thibetans. He was a Chinese, and the Chinese Communists were the invaders. He might have been taken for a spy. It’s unlikely that he would have been tolerated. His position would have been that of a German retiring with the French before Hitler’s hordes. Realizing this he went his own way. With the help of a Thibetan servant who had remained loyal to him he made his way down the mountain slopes into Garhwal where he collapsed from exhaustion and fever. No doubt he would have died where he fell, deep in the forest and far from anywhere, had not his servant, looking for food, struck the camp of an Englishman, a retired Indian army officer named Captain John Toxan.”

“That was a slice of cake. What was Toxan doing there?”

“Digging. He’d been digging there for six years.”

“For the love of Mike! Digging for what?”

“Rubies. It seems that some years before, while he was still a serving officer, out on a hunting trip during his furlough he had picked up some stones in a dry river bed. They turned out to be rubies. But they were no good. Exposed to the weather they had become friable. He knew that somewhere not far away was the main source from which they had been thrown up, or exposed by erosion, ages earlier. He was digging deeper hoping to find good

stones, flawless and valuable. He'd been at it for six years without finding anything but duds. That's how things were when Mr. Poo arrived. Toxan's original bearers had all packed up long ago with the exception of a couple of Gurkhas, old soldiers who had served in the British Indian army. They had the guts to see the thing through. Toxan took care of Mr. Poo."

"Did he know him?"

"No. He'd never even heard of him. But as far as he was concerned here was an old man down on his luck, so he took him under his wing. Mr. Poo, who speaks English like you or me, told him his story."

"He recovered?"

"Yes."

"But he still stayed on with Captain Toxan?"

"Yes."

"Why? Why didn't he go on down into India like the other Thibetan refugees?"

"For two reasons. In the first place he wasn't sure he had the strength to travel any distance and he was afraid of getting a recurrence of fever. Secondly, as I said before, he was not a Thibetan. He was a Chinese, and as feeling in India was running high against the Chinese for what they'd done in Thibet, their northern neighbour, he was worried about the sort of reception he'd get. He was certain to be unpopular, so rather than put the Indian Government to any trouble he decided to stay where he was."

"What's going to happen if Toxan gets browned off with digging and pulls out?"

"That's the trouble. He's thinking of doing that. But he and his two Gurkhas couldn't carry the old man and they can't just abandon him there."

"They might get help from a native village."

"Toxan says that would be dangerous. He says the natives don't mind helping the Thibetans but they'd probably kill a Chinese if they got their hands on him."

"How does Toxan know this? And how, for that matter, do you know all these details?"

"Because we've had a long letter from Toxan in which he explains the position. He says the old man has told him he has money in England if only he could get there. Could we do anything about it?"

"How did Toxan get the letter through?"

"He had to send his men to Chini with money for stores, as he was nearly out. They took the letter and posted it. It's a three weeks' trip each way from his camp."

"In asking us for help, Toxan is expecting rather a lot, isn't he?"

"I don't think so. Poo would have done as much for us had the position been reversed. He's that sort of man. And Toxan knows that whatever our enemies may say about us we can't be accused of abandoning old friends when they're in a spot. That goes on more often than people imagine, but we

don't make a song and dance about it."

"So boiled down the position is this: somewhere in the *bharbar*, the belt of jungle that divides the mountains of the north-east frontier and the plains, there's a party of five men, one white, one Chinese, two Gurkhas and a Thibetan; and you want to get the Chinaman here."

"Exactly."

"And you're asking me to go to fetch him."

"That is correct."

"Now tell me how you expect me to do that?"

"I leave it to you."

"With all due respect, sir, I suggest you haven't the foggiest notion of what you're asking me to do."

The Air Commodore smiled. "I've a rough idea. But the thing is possible, and that being so, you, having the advantage of knowing the country, are the man to do it. If you fail—" the Air Commodore held out his hands "—well, we can at least say we tried."

"That won't be much comfort to Mr. Poo, who will probably be dead by the time we get there. I'm thinking more of Toxan, who must be a stout feller to do what he's doing. All the same, I don't think he can be very bright in the uptake or he'd have left one of his men at Moradabad, or some place where I could get down, to lead us to his camp. Without a guide we shall never find it."

"Why is this so difficult? You've tackled jungles before. What about South America?"

"That's a different matter. You can usually get about up the Amazon because the density of the big timber prohibits much in the way of undergrowth. This Indian jungle is *real* jungle, practically solid. You can cut a way through the bamboo but when you come to rhododendron forest, as it grows there, a mass of intertwined branches as thick as your leg, you've had it. With axes a squad of pioneers might do a mile in a month. And look at the size of the *bharbar*. As I remember it it's anything from fifty to a hundred miles deep and hundreds of miles long. Native cultivation ends at about six thousand feet; then you've nothing but jungle till it begins to thin out at ten thousand. Remember, this isn't level country. Not only is it on a slope, the foothills of the Himalayas, but it went into convulsions when it was created. It's ridged and furrowed by gorges, some of them hundreds of feet deep with precipitous sides and water, tributaries of the Ganges, that tear like a mill-race, at the bottom. The only way you can get about is for a guide to take you up one of the tracks cut by our Forestry people when we were there. It'll surprise me if they're not all overgrown by now. That doesn't take long. There are a few native tribes, mostly nomadic, woodsmen who live by hunting, but for all practical purposes you can call the country uninhabited."

"All right. Having said all that will you go?"

"Of course I'll go. I've simply tried to give you an idea of what we're up

against. There should be no difficulty in getting to Moradabad, but where do we go from there? How do we set about finding Mr. Poo?"

"By aerial survey you may see the smoke of Toxan's camp fire."

"And having spent a month on foot getting to the smoke we find a party of Gond hunters cooking their dinner. It's no use saying I should be able to see Toxan's tent from the air because the trees are so thick you can't see what's underneath. Toxan must realize this. Did he give any indication at all of where he was?"

"Here's his letter, written in pencil on pieces of mouldy paper. Make what you can of it. He says his camp is at about eight thousand feet a few miles east of, and a little below, a lake called, he believes, Timbi Tso. I've checked that with the Indian Survey Department and there is such a lake."

"That's a fat lot of use; but I suppose it's better than nothing. The name of that lake, although I was never anywhere near it, rings a bell. I think it must be the one I sometimes heard referred to as the Blue Lake, or the Blue Water. Why on earth didn't Toxan make a sketch map showing the exact position of his camp, noting some salient feature, nearer than the lake, as a landmark."

"Maybe there wasn't one."

"Yes, that's more than likely. From the ground the country all looks very much alike, and no doubt it does from the air. And, of course, Toxan wouldn't be thinking of an air rescue. Pity we can't get hold of one of his men to act as guide. That would have simplified matters. They must over a period of years have been down to the low ground many times for stores, so even if there isn't a track they'd know the way. But it's no use talking of what Toxan might have done. The bearers who left him have probably forgotten all about him by now." Biggles got up. "All right, sir. Let me think about this."

"Don't think too long or you'll be too late."

"Did Toxan date his letter?"

"As you'll see, he says he didn't know the date. But as the rains had just stopped he thought it must be November. The letter came air mail, so allowing three weeks for the overland journey to the post office we can reckon it about a month since it was written."

"Okay, sir. I'll get on with it." Biggles walked to the door.

"Is there anything I can get you that might help?" inquired the Air Commodore.

Biggles stopped and thought for a moment. "Yes, there is something you might do."

"What is it?"

"Get us permits to carry firearms, at all events, our pistols. I'd also like to take a rifle. In the jungle one never knows what one is going to bump into, and no man in his right mind would wander about without some means of self-protection. After all, this is big game country. You could explain that the firearms are strictly for defence should we have to make a forced landing in some out-of-the-way place with the prospect of walking to civilization."

“Anything else?”

“A camera might be useful. Indian customs might be sticky about an air camera.”

“What reason could I give for that?”

“You can say the camera’s for taking shots for a projected T.V. series.”

“Very well. I’ll have a word with the India Office and if possible get you a Firearm Certificate and a permit for aerial photography.”

“Thank you, sir.” Biggles went out.

1 A small but very deadly snake.

2 This is a not uncommon practice in India. The hamadryad or king cobra can grow up to thirteen feet. Its colour is yellow with black crossbands.

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER III

THE START



As Biggles walked back along the corridor to the operations room he became aware of a curious thrill at the thought of returning to the country where he had been born. The thought struck him, and he wondered why, he had never been back to look at the places of which he had clear and happy memories —marred somewhat, it is true, by the fever that had sapped his strength. He found his assistant pilots waiting for him expectantly.

“Well, what’s the drill?” questioned Ginger, when he walked in.

“Do I remember someone saying he liked his climates hot?” inquired Biggles, flippantly.

“Absolutely, old boy,” answered Bertie, promptly. “That’s me. Every time a coconut.”

“I can’t promise you coconuts,” returned Biggles, lightly. “There’ll be more monkeys in the trees than nuts, where we’re going.”

“And where are we going?”

“India.”

“What part?”

“Garhwal.”

“But I say! Isn’t that where you gave your first bleat?”

“That’s the place.” Biggles sat at his desk.

“What ho! What fun.”

“You may not think it’s so funny when I tell you what we’ve been asked to do.”

“Cough it up, old boy. I can’t wait. Do we go before the chilblain season sets in?”

“Right away.”

“Lovely. Tell us about it.”

With pensive deliberation Biggles lit a cigarette. Having spent his boyhood in Northern India he knew much more about the country than he had had time

to tell the Air Commodore. Now, thinking about it, memories of half-forgotten incidents poured in on him.

"Somewhere in the jungle, on the slopes between the plains of India and the frontier of Thibet, there is an elderly Chinese gentleman by the name of Mr. Poo Tah Ling. We're going there to find him and bring him here," he announced.

Algy looked incredulous. "Are you serious?"

"Very much so, and with good cause."

"But why—"

"If you'll stop asking questions and pay attention for a few minutes I'll give you the complete gen." Biggles settled back in his chair and recounted the conversation he had had with the Air Commodore. "That's the position," he went on. "On the face of it the job looks simple enough; and so it would be but for one big snag, and that's the almost complete absence of landing facilities. As far as I know there's no airfield nearer to the objective than Moradabad, and that's some distance away. Outside that I can't visualize a flat patch of ground large enough, or level enough, to put an aircraft on without risk of a crack-up. There could be no question of landing anywhere in the jungle area, although in an emergency one might avoid a bad crack by gliding down to the lower ground and doing a belly-flop on a tea estate or a field of grain."

"What about this lake Toxan mentions?" suggested Algy.

"That, I imagine, will be our one hope of getting down within marching distance of Mr. Poo. I'm not even sure about that. It might be choked with weeds. I've never seen the place, but as I told the Chief, I've a vague recollection of having heard tell of it. There's a piece of water—I don't know how big it is—which the natives used to call the Blue Lake. I think this must be it. It shouldn't be hard to locate, provided there's just one lake and not a dozen. Having got there we're then faced with the job of finding Toxan's camp, and having spotted it, of getting to it. That means walking, and I can tell you right away it won't be easy. In fact, it may turn out to be impossible."

"If we spotted Toxan's camp we could drop a note to him saying we were waiting for him at the lake," offered Ginger.

"The old man may be too feeble to make the journey to the lake. That would probably depend on the distance, which is something we don't know. The trouble is, assuming we were lucky enough to spot Toxan's camp from the air he'd have no way of communicating with us. We wouldn't even know if Mr. Poo was dead or alive. If he was dead it would be pointless to go on with the operation. If Toxan started walking to the lake, and we started walking to his camp, we should certainly miss each other in the jungle and be in a worse mess than ever."

"Is the going as bad as all that?"

"You've no idea until you've seen it. I know you've seen some rough country but I doubt if you've ever struck anything as thick as the Indian

jungle. Remember, I know what I'm talking about. I've had some of it. But then, when I went out on a hunting trip I was always in the care of a local *shikari* who knew his way through the tangle of game tracks. Most of these tracks wander about all over the place, often with only a pool or a salt-lick for the objective, so without a guide they wouldn't be much use to us. I used to go out with a grand old fellow named Josna Kumar, a wonderful tracker. What he didn't know about the country wasn't worth knowing. But he must have passed on long ago."

"Would you call this *bharbar* bad country?"

"Bad in what way?"

"Any way."

"Apart from the difficulty of getting about, no. From the spectacular point of view some of it is really magnificent. I've seen stands of timber that must have been saplings about the time William the Conqueror was crossing the Channel. Of course, you've got to know what you're doing or you can get in a mess—but that goes for most places. The prospect of going down with fever is always there; that was my trouble; but we're not likely to be there long enough for that to worry us. Don't get the wrong idea of the country. It isn't dangerous in the sense that it's unexplored, bristling with hostile tribes. Nothing like that. White men have hunted it for years, and most natives, such as there are, are usually delighted to see them. They're chiefly Gonds. Their original home was in Central India. It was tribal warfare that caused them to retreat to the hills."

"I had an idea those capital soldiers, the Gurkhas, came from Garhwal," put in Algy.

"Quite right. Regions of Garhwal and Nepal. They're grand fellows, but they're not really jungle folk. We may see Bhotiyas. They look rather like Japs and believe in ghosts. My old *shikari* always seemed a bit nervous about running into a sort of secret tribe called Rishis, but I never saw any so I can't say anything about them. None of these jungle people cultivate land for food. They all live by hunting."

"I was thinking more of dangerous animals," said Ginger.

"It depends on what you call dangerous. There are plenty of animals—elephant, tiger, panther, bears and what have you, but only in rare circumstances would one be likely to go for a man unless the man started the trouble. On a trip like ours we're not likely to interfere with any of 'em, we've something else to do."

"What about tiger?"

"Even he does his best to keep out of your way. There are exceptions, naturally. An elephant may turn rogue when he grows old and bad tempered, and so finds himself kicked out of the herd. The odd tiger or leopard may develop a taste for human meat and do a lot of mischief before he's knocked off. Fortunately they're uncommon. In my day the natives, not having the proper weapons for the job, couldn't deal with these pests, so when things

became really bad the government would send along a specially trained white hunter to wipe out the scourge. No doubt there are now Indians who handle this sort of business.”

“What about snakes?” asked Bertie. “If there’s one thing that gives me the heeby-jeebies it’s snakes.”

Biggles smiled. “Oh, there’s no shortage of snakes. Most of them are harmless enough but it’s as well not to take chances till you know ‘em. The trouble with snakes is, they have a habit of popping up where you least expect them, and are not even thinking of such things. I had several narrow escapes when I was a kid. Once I stooped to pick up a ball, and jumped back just in time. Lying coiled beside it was that frightful little devil, a *krait*. If he bites you, you’ve had it. Another time I pushed open the bathroom door, and a *krait*, which must have been lying on the top, fell on my shoulder. Luckily for me he bounced on the floor, and as you can imagine, I bounced into the next room. One forgets about snakes, but when that sort of thing happens you remember ‘em. My father was once bitten on the thumb by a Russel Viper and nearly died. He was in agony for days. If anyone’s scared of snakes he’d better stay at home.”

“Don’t you get pythons there?”

“Plenty, but they’re not poisonous. They’re constrictors. As a general rule the little ‘uns are the worst. I used to go out looking for pythons. They like water and a cool spot. A great place for ‘em was in the narrow irrigation ditches on the tea estates. I once saw one nearly thirty feet long. The natives make all sorts of nice things from their skins. But we shall have plenty of time later to natter about these things. Let’s see about getting organized. We’ll start with the maps. Then we can make a plan of campaign.”

That was how the operation began, and up to the time of arrival at the Blue Lake it proceeded without a hitch. The flight out, via Delhi and Moradabad was ordinary routine, facilitated by documents provided by the Air Commodore and the India Office in London. To the relief of Biggles, for officialdom can on occasion be tiresome and cause delays, nothing was questioned.

The party spent two days in Moradabad while Biggles tried to obtain news of Captain Toxan. There was just a chance, he thought, of making contact, through an agency, with one of Toxan’s bearers who had left his service and was now living in the town. However, this failed. Possibly because he had been away in the wilds for so long no one appeared even to have heard of Captain Toxan. From where the men he sent down from time to time, for stores, obtained them, could not be discovered, so rather than waste any more time, he had, with his tanks topped up, made a reconnaissance to locate the Blue Lake, the first objective. This had proved relatively easy, for there was only one piece of water at the known altitude of Timbi Tso—to give the place its proper name—large enough to be called a lake.

Having examined the surface and finding it clear except for water-lilies in

the shallows, seeing no point in using up fuel by returning to Moradabad a landing had been made and an advanced base established. By the time this was done the light was fading and it was therefore too late to start the search for Toxan's camp that day.

So, watches having been arranged, an automatic though apparently unnecessary precaution, the party spent its first night in the jungle, the plan being to survey, and possibly take photographs which could be examined at leisure, in the morning.

Which brings us to the point where Ginger, fetching water for early tea, saw the tiger.

CHAPTER IV



CHAPTER IV NOTHING DOING

“ARE you going to leave anyone here to keep guard over our stuff?” asked Algy, as the camp was tidied up preparatory to making the first serious reconnaissance.

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” decided Biggles. “This lake can’t be visited by men very often or we’d see marks. There should be game tracks leading to a stretch of water of this size. Most things have to drink. No doubt there are elephant tracks, but the only way we’d find them would be by sweating round the perimeter of the lake, and I’ve no intention of doing that. If a hunting party did come along I don’t think they’d touch our things. The natives I met years ago were mostly honest and trustworthy. In view of what we have to do the more eyes we have in the machine the better. We’ll lace up the flap of the tent to keep monkeys out. I can hear some about. They’re inquisitive little rascals, not to say mischievous. We shan’t be away long.”

“What’s this wonderful aroma I get whiffs of every now and then?” asked Ginger.

“It’s a shrub. I don’t know the botanical name but the local people call it *mhowa*. It’s common everywhere. If you get too much of it, it can be a bit sickly.”

“The flies are a bit grim now the sun’s up,” observed Bertie.

“You’d be lucky to find a place in the tropics where there are no flies,” Biggles told him, as he secured the tent. “Flies and ants by the million. Before we get airborne I think it might be a good thing if you all had a dekko at this particular type of jungle so that you’ll know what you’re up against if you ever have to walk. Come over here.” Pushing aside the undergrowth he forced a passage, not without difficulty, for a few yards. “Apart from anything else, even if you can make progress it’s almost impossible to keep direction. Naturally, you choose the easiest way, and that means weaving about. If you get lost you’ve had it. The only paths are elephant tracks, and they may lead anywhere except where you want to go. Elephants eat as they wander along,

which is why they leave tracks. With all that bulk to keep going they rarely stop eating. My old *shikari* assured me an elephant eats eighteen hours a day. How true that is I don't know. I've never watched one for that long. As it's about the only way of getting about, everything else, men as well as animals, use the elephant tracks. Unfortunately the tops of the trees will prevent us from seeing any sort of tracks from the air. I say unfortunately because it might be useful, in an emergency, to know if there are any, and where."

Biggles stopped when his advance was halted by what looked like the writhing tentacles of a thousand octopuses. "Take a look at that," he invited. "It's rhododendron. You can bash a way through palm and bamboo but to get through this stuff you'd need an axe. Even then you wouldn't get far. This happens to be only a small patch so you could get round it; but you're quite likely to hit an area of miles of rhododendron. Then what? You can't get through it. I can tell you that because I've tried. Yet to go round may take you so far off your route you'd be lucky to get back to it. A compass is all right in the open, but it isn't much use in this sort of stuff. You see what I mean." Biggles indicated what lay before them.

"Are there no roads at all?" inquired Ginger.

"When the British ran India they made a few roads into the *bharbar* for the use of the Forestry officers, but road making here is a big job so they're few and far apart. I've seen no sign of one anywhere near, so for all our chance of finding one we might as well forget it."

"Listen! Can I hear an elephant now?"

"No."

"Then what's that crackling sound I can hear?"

"A tree. A kind of teak. The natives say when it crackles it's a sign of hot weather coming." Biggles smiled. "By the time we leave here you fellows should know quite a bit of jungle-lore." He pointed to a shrub bearing purple and white blossoms. "Be careful with that," he warned. "It's *madar*, and deadly poison, so don't try chewing it if you're thirsty. It's said that when a native wants to get rid of another he slips a few of those flowers in his drink. But the sun's well up so we might as well get topsides."

"What exactly is the scheme, old boy," asked Bertie, as they retraced their steps.

"Nothing definite, except that we're going to try to locate Toxan. I can't say more than that. You can see what we're up against. I appreciate Toxan's difficulties but it's a pity he couldn't have been a bit more precise about his position. According to our altimeter when we landed the lake is a bit below nine thousand. He says his camp is a few miles to the east of it, and a bit below. What does he mean by a few miles! Ten—twenty—forty? In a country of this size fifty miles could be called close. What does he mean when he says a little below the lake? How far below? He talks of eight thousand feet. I hope he's right, or we might find ourselves looking for something that doesn't exist. I suspect the fact of the matter is, he himself isn't absolutely

certain of his position. He may never have seen the lake; just heard native talk about it, and that isn't to be relied on. Apparently it was the only conspicuous landmark he could think of when he wrote the letter. Without that for a guide, vague though it is, the job would be next to impossible."

Reaching the cable by which the machine was moored to the bank Biggles began pulling it in.

As a matter of detail the aircraft had been left afloat as a precaution against interference by monkeys. For the same reason the food supply, tinned or packaged, of course, had been left on board, only to be taken ashore as required. Biggles did not expect to find food available on the spot, not even fruit; for contrary to general belief little in the way of food is to be found in a tropical forest, any fruit, berries or nuts that do occur being devoured by birds and monkeys. Any that fall are immediately disposed of by ants and other insects. Nothing much could be expected from a native village even if one happened to be near, the reason being that hillmen, although they may keep an odd cow, a few goats or some scrawny chickens, do not normally practice cultivation beyond, perhaps, a tiny patch of millet.

"The whole bally country seems to be tipped up on a slope, if you see what I mean," observed Bertie. "Wouldn't Toxan make his camp on a bit of a plateau— or something of that sort? Any little piece of open ground."

"I doubt if you'll see any open ground in the jungle. The slope isn't regular, either. The ground rises in a series of steps, as it were—pretty big ones, too, some of 'em. Often it's sheer cliff. The only place where you'd be likely to find ground not smothered in vegetation would be at the bottom of a gorge, where nothing gets a chance to grow because of the seasonal spates. If Toxan's camp is in a gorge, it's unlikely we shall be able to spot it from the air."

"You think his camp might be in a gorge?"

"It's quite likely. In the first place he'd need to have water handy. Secondly, he says he found his first rubies in a dry river bed, and as here all the rivers flow through gorges or ravines, which they themselves have cut, he must be in some such place. Where else would he be likely to find rubies, or any other precious stones, except in water-washed sand or gravel? He certainly wouldn't find 'em on the floor of the jungle, which is deep in leaf mould and rotting vegetation, not to mention the ferns and things that flourish on it. The fact that the river was dry when Toxan found the stones doesn't necessarily mean it's dry now, just after the monsoon. These aren't ordinary rivers. They're sluices, run-offs, for the rains, and the melting snow and ice on the higher ground. The water has to go somewhere, so this entire slope becomes a vast watershed. Through the ages the water, rushing downhill, has cut beds deep into the ground. Hence the gorges, which can be hundreds of feet deep. Sometimes you'll get two or three of 'em joining up to make one big one. Most of the water eventually finds itself in the Ganges, which drains all these hills. But let's go and have a look at it. You'll soon see what I mean."

By this time they had taken their places in the aircraft. "I shall keep low and fly as slowly as I dare," went on Biggles. "Everyone watch for smoke, a flag, or piece of rag, or anything that looks as if it might be a signal. The only thing about that is, even if Toxan hears an aircraft he may not suppose it has anything to do with him. Ginger, you keep the camera handy and shoot anything that looks as if it might mean something. Okay, let's go."

Biggles took off.

Almost as soon as the machine was airborne the great ocean of primeval forest and jungle could be seen spreading away to hazy horizons. On one side it rose steeply towards the giant Himalayan peaks that fringed the distant northern sky. To the right the green tree tops fell away to be swallowed up in a misty blue haze that hung over the plains of India. The enormity of the task confronting those in the aircraft was at once apparent, although they had of course had a glimpse of it before, when they were looking for the lake.

The machine made its way slowly eastward, sometimes on a gentle zigzag course, up and down, to and fro, and sometimes circling, never at a height of more than a few hundred feet. The only break in the grey-green sea occurred when it was gashed by a deep ravine as if the land had been struck by an axe wielded by one of the gods which the natives believed had their homes in the distant ice-clad mountains. These gorges, which were frequent, mostly ran up and down, that is, across the route taken by the aircraft. More often than not there were foaming rapids at the bottom.

"By the end of the dry season much of that water will have dried up," remarked Biggles. "It must have been at that time of the year that Toxan picked up his rubies."

"What would he be doing at the bottom of a ravine, anyway?" asked Ginger.

"He was on a hunting trip. The bottom of a ravine is as good a place as any, because everything has to drink, and even when dry there are usually little pockets of water left in the rocks."

"Our lake must be the only piece of level ground for miles."

"We don't know that that's level. It might be no more than a whacking great hole. With no way out the water would collect in it, fill it up and become a lake. For all we know it might be hundreds of feet deep in the middle. That's of no interest to us—provided the water stays there."

For an hour the *Gadfly* cruised up and down, covering the ground between seven and nine thousand feet for an estimated distance of forty miles or so from the lake. Not a thing looking remotely like the object of the search was seen. Only to the north, the higher ground, was there any change in the colour of the panorama. In that direction long strands of darker-foliaged spruce and fir imposed a pattern on the otherwise even tint of the lower forest.

"This seems pretty hopeless," said Bertie, putting his head in the cockpit. "Can't see a bally thing—not a road, not a village, nothing. The place might be dead."

“That’s what I thought you’d think when you’d had a good look at it from topsides,” returned Biggles, lugubriously. “I’m going back to the lake. We could go on doing this until we ran out of petrol.”

“What else can we do?”

“Nothing.”

“If Toxan’s still alive he must have heard us, even if he couldn’t see us. Why didn’t he make some sort of signal?”

“I’ve been thinking about that. As I said before, he may not connect an aircraft with a rescue. Another point that occurs to me is this: he may not have had a signal ready. He may be away from camp, without means of lighting a fire, for instance. That’s why I’m going back to the lake. We’ll try again later. If he heard us he will have had time to get some sort of signal ready. I daren’t go on burning petrol at this rate. We can get more at Moradabad, of course, but I don’t want to waste time going to and fro. Besides, people might get curious as to what we’re doing.”

“Even if they knew we were looking for Toxan—what of it?” put in Ginger.

“Certain people might wonder why the British Government should suddenly take such an interest in a casual prospector.”

“You mean—they might think he’s a spy?”

“They might. The Chinese have already claimed that India has spies on the Thibetan frontier. That’s been denied, naturally. We don’t want to cause trouble. We’ll go back to the lake. You’ve seen enough to demonstrate what a futile business it would be to look for Toxan from ground level.”

“No use, old boy. No bally use at all,” agreed Bertie.

Biggles turned west, and still scrutinizing the forest below made his way back to the lake which, from the air, with the sun now high in the heavens, made a wonderful picture.

“You were right about the monkeys!” exclaimed Ginger, as Biggles glided in to land. “They’ve found our camp. The place is crawling with ‘em.”

The little animals scattered and fled, however, when Biggles, having touched down, opened the throttle a trifle to take the machine right in to its mooring.

Having gone ashore examination revealed that no harm had been done although the monkeys had obviously done their best to find a way into the tent. But now silence reigned. There was not a monkey in sight.

“They’re shocking little thieves,” remarked Biggles, as he unlaced the flap. “I’d bet they’re watching us now, from cover. Down nearer civilization they became so precocious you daren’t leave a thing about. I remember once travelling with my guv’nor we left the car for a few minutes, carelessly leaving a window open. When we came back monkeys were streaming up the hill taking everything portable they could lay their hands on. Among other things they pinched my camera.”

At this point in Biggles’ story the hush was shattered by an almost human

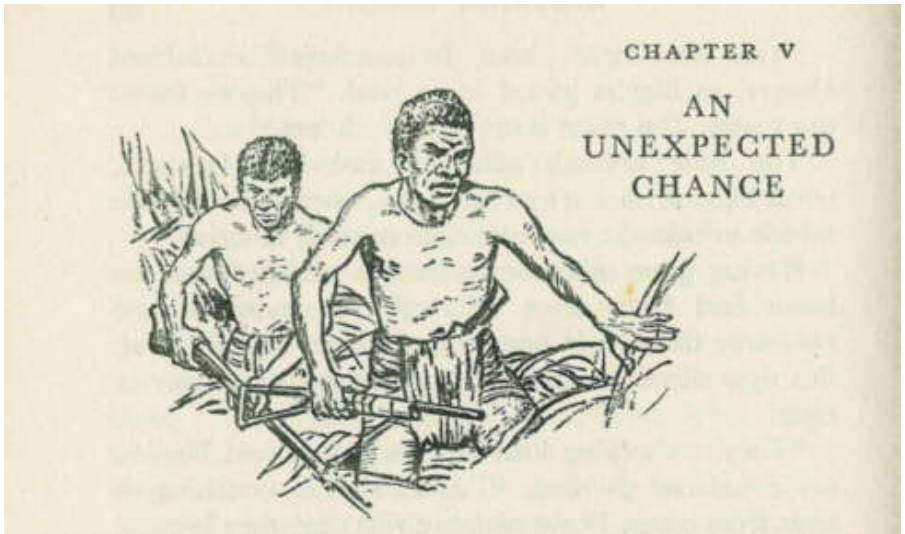
shriek of terror. It ended abruptly.

“That’s one monkey that won’t go home tonight,” said Biggles soberly.

“What happened to it?” asked Ginger.

“I’d say the poor little brute was so interested in us that he didn’t look where he was going and bumped into a panther, or a tiger—probably the one you saw this morning. That’s where meddling with other people’s property has got him. Put on the kettle. We’ll have a cuppa while we talk things over and try to work out some way of making contact with this chap Toxan.”

CHAPTER V



OVER the next three days Biggles made at least one flight per day over the area in which Captain Toxan and the refugee Chinaman, Mr. Poo, were supposed to be encamped; but it was all to no purpose.

These flights were not easy. At the low altitude at which it was necessary to fly the hilly and broken ground made the air extremely bumpy, which was a strain on both the machine and the pilot. The knowledge that a crash would be inevitable in the event of engine failure did nothing to make flying more comfortable.

Biggles, becoming desperate, began to take chances by flying right through some of the deeper gorges; that is to say, below the general level of the forest on either side. Actually, only Ginger knew this because Biggles either went out alone or took only Ginger with him, making the excuse that by saving weight he would save petrol, which, as the gauge showed, was running low. Ginger, consulted privately, had agreed to accept the risks of “shooting the *nullah*” as the operation of flying through a ravine was known to the R.A.F. on the North-West Frontier in the days of tribal warfare.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, after Biggles had been out, flying solo, on another fruitless flight, Algy and Bertie, who with Ginger had remained in camp, took the machine to Moradabad to have the tanks topped up. They made no secret of their belief that they were wasting their time, Toxan, having made no signal, being either dead or missing.

The weather was getting hotter every day, and some of the smaller streams that cascaded down from the high mountains already showed signs of shrinking, in that they no longer foamed as they raced towards their parent river, the Ganges. The mosquitoes round the lake were bad, too, rising in

hordes when the sun went down. What Biggles was really afraid of was that one or all of them might go down with jungle fever, really a severe form of malaria; for although they made light of the pest, and took reasonable precautions, such as at night wrapping the exposed parts of their bodies in mosquito netting, swollen faces in the morning told their own story. Instinctively during the stifling heat the protective covering was thrown aside. Insect repellent brought a certain amount of relief but it was not entirely effective.

Nothing more could be done about it, and Biggles was near despair when fate took a hand to restore their hopes. It happened like this. Ginger was on his way to the lake for a sponge down when, with something of a shock, he saw two natives standing a little farther along looking at the tent. They appeared to be discussing it. Both carried firearms.

Ginger, promptly changing his mind about a bath, returned quickly to the tent and told Biggles what he had seen.

Biggles lost no time in going out. At first the men could not be seen, apparently having retired; but when Biggles called they reappeared, and at his request advanced towards him. They wore only waist-cloths, and from their dark skins, black curly hair and broad, rather flat noses, he identified them as Gonds. When he spoke to them in their own language they came on with more confidence, and were soon sitting cross-legged on the ground with mugs of tea in their hands. One possessed an old Lee-Enfield rifle which in all probability had once belonged to a British soldier. A bayonet, somewhat rusty, was still attached to the muzzle, and looked as if it was never taken off. The other had a fearsome “gaspipe” gun which looked as if he had made it himself. Both wore Gurkha type *kukris* and were evidently hunters.

This was where Biggles’ knowledge of local languages was such an advantage, for although the Gonds spoke very good English, which is used more or less all over India, when they were at a loss for a word he could help them out. For the rest, English was the language used, so everyone could follow the conversation. Biggles had, of course, explained at once to the others who and what the natives were.

Looking at the two men curiously in view of their obvious reluctance to come straight to the tent Biggles asked them if they were afraid of something.

“Yes, sahib,” answered one, simply. “We were afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Of the soldiers.”

Biggles’ eyebrows went up. “What soldiers?”

After the two men had glanced at each other one answered: “The Chinese soldiers.”

Biggles frowned. “Do you mean Chinese soldiers are down here—in the forest?”

“Yes, sahib.”

“What are *they* doing here?”

“They came down from the mountains to look for a man.”

“That doesn’t sound so good,” muttered Algy.

Biggles continued his questioning. “Who is this man they are looking for?”
Actually, he had a pretty good idea.

The men could not answer this question. They said, with obvious truth, they did not know.

“How many of these soldiers are there?”

Again the men did not know. All they could say was, a party of six had come to their village demanding food. They had said if they were not given food they would burn the village. They had been given a goat and some millet. It was thought these six men were not alone.

Biggles was clearly taking this news seriously. “How long since you saw these soldiers?”

The man thought for a moment and then held up ten fingers.

“Hm. Ten days. Why did you come here?”

“We were out hunting, sahib, and we see plane coming down. We came to see who it is and what happens.”

“How far is it from here to your village?”

“Two days, one night. Down the hill.” The speaker pointed the direction.

“I see. Now tell me this. Have you seen, or heard talk, of a sahib named Captain Toxan?”

The men searched their memories. “No, sahib.”

“Have you heard of a sahib who stays a long time, not far from here?”

“Yes, sahib.” The two Gonds held a brisk conversation in their own language, in which a name was mentioned. The name was Ram Shan. It turned out this was a man of their village who, out on a hunting trip, had seen the camp of a sahib. He had talked of this on his return. If he had learned his name he had not mentioned it. The camp was in a *nullah*. There had been digging—much digging.

“That sounds like Toxan,” said Ginger.

“How long since Ram Shan saw this sahib?” questioned Biggles.

There was some difficulty about getting an answer to this because the Gonds were somewhat hazy, the matter being of no importance to them. Finally the two men agreed it was about two months.

“What are your names?” inquired Biggles.

One of the men was Bira Shah, the other, Mata Dhinn.

“We are looking for Toxan sahib,” explained Biggles. “We must find him. As it seems that Ram Shan could guide me to his camp, will you return to the village and bring him here to me?”

“We will go, sahib, but he will not come.”

“Very well. If I go with you to your village will he lead me to the camp of Captain Toxan?”

“No, sahib.”

Biggles looked puzzled. “Why not?”

“He will not leave the village.”

“But why? Is he ill?”

“No, sahib. He is a man with goats and is afraid to leave them for the tiger. Also he has a wife to protect.”

“Tiger! What tiger? What talk is this between brave men?”

One of the men explained. For some weeks now the village had been harassed by an evil one, a man-eater. It had killed more than twenty men, women and children. Everyone now lived in terror. No one would go out, but even so, the tiger had taken to raiding the village. He had come even in daylight. The *bhoomkas* could do nothing.

“What’s a *bhoomkas*?” asked Ginger softly.

“A tiger charmer,” replied Biggles, briefly. “He’s supposed to be able to hold secret conversations with tigers.”

Well, that was it. Ram Shan was a man with a wife and children, and goats. The two visitors were sure he would not leave the village for fear of them falling prey to the evil one.

Biggles drew a deep breath. “What a nuisance,” he said, looking at the others. “Here we get a clue, only to have it fall flat on account of a confounded tiger.”

He turned back to the two Gonds. “You have guns. Can’t you shoot this tiger?”

“No, sahib. We have tried, but bullets do not hurt him. He is under the protection of Shatan.”

“Who says so?”

“The *bhoomkas*.”

Biggles shrugged, helplessly. “You see,” he said to the others. “When people here get these ideas, that it’s futile to try to kill the tiger, they just pack up and do nothing about it, although they’re not lacking in courage.” Again he turned to the visitors. “If I come with you and kill this devil will Ram Shan guide me to the camp of Toxan sahib?”

They thought he would.

“It looks as if, before we can get on the track of Toxan, I shall have to go and shoot this infernal tiger,” Biggles told the others, grimly. “This chance may never come again, and if Chinese troops are on the prowl—and we can guess who they’re looking for—we’ve no time to lose. We may already be too late. Of course, Chinese soldiers have no right to be here. I’m by no means sure of how they’d treat us if we ran foul of them.”

“Why not report the matter to the Indian government,” suggested Ginger. “They’d soon clear them out.”

“And start a war between India and China? Not likely. The Chinese invaders of Thibet would have excuses ready, I’ve no doubt.”

“Well, what are you going to do?”

“I’m going with these fellows to their village. If nothing else Ram Shan may be able to give me the position of Toxan’s camp. I shall do my best to

persuade him to lead me to it. Alternatively, he might come here, and from the machine point out this particular *nullah* in which Toxan has apparently hidden himself.”

“Without air experience he may not be able to do that,” said Algy, dubiously. “From topsides things will look very different from what they do at ground level.”

“He should be able to recognize a *nullah* from its size and shape.”

“But you heard what these chaps said. Ram Shan won’t leave home on account of the tiger.”

“In that case it looks as if I shall have to dispose of the tiger.”

“Do you really mean that?”

“Certainly.” Biggles grinned. “When I was a kid the height of my ambition was to shoot a tiger, to establish my reputation as a *shikari*. This is my chance, and a man-eater, at that. The brute ought to be killed, anyway. If he isn’t he may terrorize the village for years. We could go on for weeks doing what we’ve been doing since we came here without getting anywhere. I’m going to see Ram Shan.”

“Does that mean you’re going by yourself?”

“No. I’d better have somebody with me in case of accident. I’ll take Bertie. He fancies himself as a bit of a *shikari* so he can lend me a hand if it becomes necessary to do a spot of tiger hunting.”

“Oh here, I say old boy, come off it,” protested Bertie. “I never claimed to be anything of the sort.”

“You’ve done a lot of stalking.”

“Not for tigers.”

“This is your chance.”

“Chance for what?”

“To bag a tiger.”

“More likely get bagged myself.”

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid of tigers?” bantered Biggles.

“Terrified. They have such big teeth to bite you with.”

“Oh, quit fooling,” broke in Ginger. “Of course Bertie will go. What about me and Algy?”

Biggles became serious. “With these Chinese troops about someone will have to keep an eye on our camp kit. They may take a fancy to it. If you like, you and Algy can take turns spotting for Toxan but don’t leave base for too long at a time. And don’t run the machine short of petrol in case I come back in a hurry with Ram Shan and need it.”

“What happens if Ram Shan agrees to take you to Toxan’s camp? That could be a long walk, and you might be away from here for some time. We wouldn’t know where you were or how to get in touch with you.”

Biggles pondered the problem for a minute. “Let’s put it like this.” he decided. “If I’m not back in four days you can reckon I’m on my way to Toxan’s camp with Ram Shan. If I can get to it the rest should be relatively

easy. The first thing I'll do is make a smoke smudge to mark the spot. If Toxan and Mr. Poo are able to travel I shall bring them here, Ram Shan acting as guide. He'll know the position of the lake. If they're not fit to do the journey I'll get Ram Shan, or these two fellows here, to bring us back. It's time we made contact with Toxan, so let's do that for a start. I'll decide on the next step when that's been done. Of course, if I find Toxan's camp abandoned there'll be no point in staying on here. We'd pack up and go home. Okay?"

"Okay," agreed Algy and Ginger.

Biggles turned back to the two Gonds and explained his plan to them. Without hesitation they announced their willingness to take him to their village. They were about to return home, anyway.

"Right," said Biggles, briskly. "Let's get on with it. We shan't need much in the way of kit. It can all go in one bag. These chaps will carry it. Enough food for two or three days, soap and towel, and, of course, the rifle with a few clips of ammunition."

In ten minutes all was ready. Biggles' last orders to Ginger and Algy were: "Don't leave camp for too long at a stretch. Keep out of trouble with these Chinese, if you can, should they come along this way. If you see smoke rising from a ravine the chances are it'll be me, because I shall stoke up if I hear the machine. It might be a good thing to take a photo to pin-point the spot so that we should have a record of where the place is. That's all. See you later."

Observing that Biggles and Bertie were ready to march the Gonds got up, and picking up their loads led the way, which at first followed the border of the lake. For a little while the going was heavy and therefore slow, the natives often using their *kukris* to clear a passage; but then, suddenly, and unexpectedly as far as Biggles was concerned, they came upon a muddy path which, emerging from the forest, ended at the water. Biggles recognized it as an elephant track, and made a remark to that effect.

"Yes, sahib," agreed one of the guides, as they turned into what was a dimly lighted tunnel through the towering timber that entwined their branches overhead.

"Are we likely to meet the elephants?" asked Biggles.

The Gond thought not. He had, he said, come this way to the lake without seeing anything of them.

As for the most part the track took a gentle course downhill the going was now easier. At any rate, it was no longer necessary for the natives to use their *kukris*, although care had often to be taken to pick a path through broken branches, stripped of their leaves, cast down by the big beasts as they ate their way through the jungle. Scars on the trees on either side showed from where they had been torn; but none was recent.

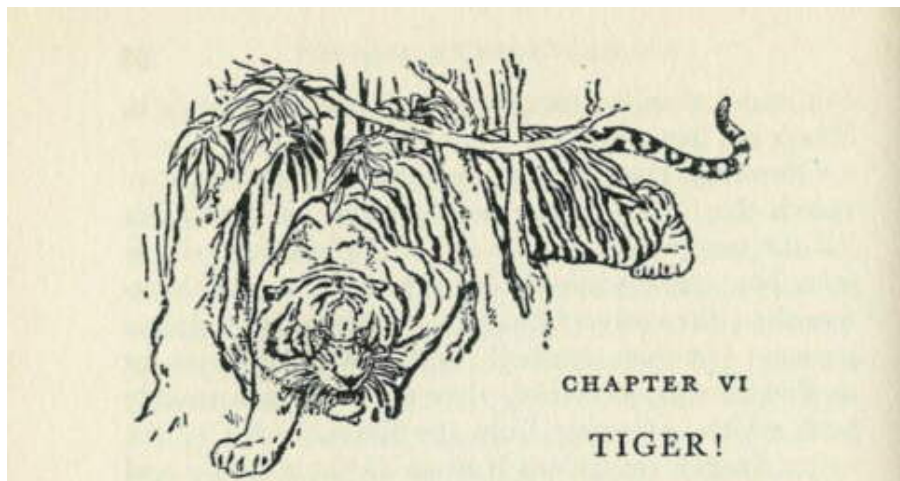
"This is better, old boy," remarked Bertie, cheerfully.

"Don't forget it'll be uphill coming back," reminded Biggles.

After that the march continued in silence, through an atmosphere that was oppressive with a sultry heat and the stench of rotting vegetation.

¹ *Kukri*—a heavy, curved knife, about two feet long and weighing about four pounds. It was standard equipment in the Ghurkha regiments of the British army.

CHAPTER VI



As no incident of interest occurred on the journey that followed it can be passed over quickly.

Secretly, although he found it tiresome, Biggles rather enjoyed it. To him it was like old times, or like re-living a half forgotten dream. Memories of such trips with his father and their old *shikari*, both long dead, filled his thoughts. In fact, now that he was back in surroundings once familiar he found that he remembered more than he had anticipated. For this, no doubt, the smells, and the occasional sounds, such as the squabbling of monkeys high overhead or in the distance, were responsible. The strange trees and insects were like old friends there to greet him. So, for the most part the march was made in silence. Nothing in the way of big game was seen, although that is not to say it was not there, as footprints and other signs on the ground often testified.

The track was by no means straight. Far from that it wandered all over the place as it made detours to avoid dells and ravines. Frequently it joined or crossed others, but the guides were never in doubt as to the way.

The first time this happened Biggles said to Bertie: "It isn't easy, but try to remember the path in case you ever have to go it alone." Biggles himself was doing this automatically, as his early training had taught him, noting a fallen tree here, an outcrop of rock there, and the like.

The temperature rose as they descended to a lower level, and by the time they were forced by darkness to halt for the night it was reckoned they had dropped something like two thousand feet. It was also realized that their camp by the lake was comparatively cool in comparison.

Preparations for the night were swiftly made by the Gonds who were experienced hunters. They were simple enough. Heaps of fern and twigs were cut for beds, and enough sere wood to keep a small fire going. This was more to discourage the mosquitoes by the smoke than any dangerous beasts that

might be near. Sitting on their beds Biggles and Bertie had a frugal supper of sardines and dry biscuits, sharing these with their travelling companions to whom these things were luxuries. Tired, they both slept soundly, the Gonds taking turns to keep guard and replenish the fire.

The first grey of dawn, heralded by the monkeys and the raucous cries of birds in the upper branches of the trees, saw them again on the move. Biggles suspected, and this was later confirmed, that the party was making faster time than if the Gonds had travelled alone; for to them, he knew, time would be of no importance, and they would often stop to investigate prospects of deer and other game.

It was about noon when their approach to the village was announced in no uncertain manner. Biggles knew they were getting near because the guides had increased their pace and no longer bothered themselves with the precautions they had taken earlier.

Suddenly, at no great distance ahead, there was a shout, instantly to be followed by an increasing clamour of yells and the beating of a drum. For a brief moment Biggles thought this was for their benefit; a sort of welcome home; but one glance at the faces of the natives dispelled the idea. They had stopped, and their skins had turned that curious green-brown tint which in coloured races is the equivalent of white men turning pale. It denotes fear, or shock.

“Is that the tiger?” asked Biggles tersely.

“It is he,” was the breathless answer.

Biggles took his rifle, an Express he had used on previous occasions, which one of the Gonds had been carrying, and jerking a bullet from the magazine into the breech, strode on.

“You’d better keep behind me in case the devil comes this way,” he told Bertie, who had no such weapon.

The shouting had now died away to a sinister silence.

Two hundred yards on, the forest broke down to a small open glade, not very wide but fairly long, carpeted with trodden sun-scorched grass on which had been built a number of shacks—they could hardly be called houses—of rough timber and thatch. At the extremity of these it seemed that the entire population of the village had collected in a group, some forty or fifty persons in all. They made no sound, but stood staring at something farther along the glade where the outlying shrubs of the jungle brought it to an end.

Looking in that direction Biggles saw the dreadful spectacle of a tiger calmly walking away, without the slightest haste, dragging a woman by the shoulder. With her free hand she was beating the tiger’s face, but all to no purpose, for it continued to walk on. No one appeared to be doing anything about it, although to be fair to the natives, without weapons suitable for dealing with such a situation there was nothing much they could do.

Without a word Biggles broke into a run. Pushing his way through the little crowd he continued on, by which time he was within a hundred yards of the

man-eater; but he dare not shoot, of course, for fear of hitting the woman. He raced on, closing the gap, with the tiger still walking away, still dragging its victim, and in its confidence not troubling to look behind it. The woman had ceased her futile struggles, but she was still conscious, as her piteous cries revealed.

When Biggles was perhaps forty yards away, hoping the beast would drop the woman and so give him a chance for a shot, he let out a yell. Hearing someone so close the killer now deigned to look back. Seeing a white man, and a tiger knows the difference between a white man and a native, it opened its mouth to show its teeth and growl. The woman fell on the ground, face down, apparently having fainted, for she did not move.

Biggles brought the rifle to his shoulder, but before he could fire, the tiger, gun-wise, or perhaps actuated by some unholy instinct, stepped behind a bush that stood in a patch of waist-high grass and disappeared from sight.

Biggles lowered the rifle, and holding it at the ready continued to advance, afraid the beast would fade into the jungle before he could get his sights on it. Nearing the bush behind which the tiger had disappeared he went on more slowly, a step at a time, finger on trigger, expecting a charge every instant. He passed the woman, lying where she had fallen, but he dare not look at her, much less do anything to help her. His eyes were on the bush. Not for a split second did they leave it. He stopped, staring. There was not a movement. He listened. Not a sound. He went on, very very slowly. He reached the bush. The tiger was nowhere in sight. He stopped again, eyes searching an area of two-foot-high dry grass beyond the bush.

A slight noise behind spun him round, and Bertie came nearer to being shot than ever in his life before. He strolled up, carrying in the crook of his arm the rifle belonging to Bira Shah, the bayonet still fixed.

"What the devil do you think you're doing?" rasped Biggles, whose nerves, naturally, were at full stretch. "I might have shot you."

"Where's the tiger?"

"I don't know, but he's not far away. Go back."

"Not me. I'm not having you hog this little party on your own. Two guns are better than one."

Biggles, instantly on seeing Bertie had turned again to face the direction in which he knew the tiger must be. "All right," he said tersely, but without raising his voice. "Stand back to back with me in case he works his way round behind us. He can't be far away and may come from any direction. If you speak keep your voice down. He'll be listening."

There was a minute of silence. Nothing happened.

"Are you sure he didn't reach the jungle?" asked Bertie, softly.

"Certain. I'd have seen him. He wouldn't leave the woman. He's lying close, watching us. Are you sure that *bundook* of yours is loaded?"

"You bet it is. I've checked it."

"Okay. Don't move, but see if you can spot the devil. If you do, don't

shoot unless he charges. Let me have first shot. That rifle you've got hold of has been knocking about for years and may not be accurate within yards."

Another silence.

"He's gone," said Bertie.

"Not he. He's lying somewhere in this grass. He may not move unless he thinks we've seen him."

"Let's beat him out of it."

"Not on your life. Are you crazy?"

"How about tossing a match into it? That should shift him."

"No. It's too easy to miss a running shot and he might come from behind the smoke. I'd rather catch him squatting. He's close. Within twenty yards of us."

"I can't believe that."

"You will. I can smell him. He's watching us."

Silence fell, a hot attentive hush; the atmosphere was electric.

Biggles' eyes roved over the grass, slowly and methodically, yard by yard, section by section. Sweat ran down his face and dripped off the end of his nose. He dare not take his finger off the trigger to wipe it off. Suddenly his eyes stopped and remained fixed.

"I can see him," he breathed. "Half-right, at twenty yards. He's lying lengthways on, facing us, watching us. He'll come any moment now. He knows I've seen him. Our eyes have met."

In fact, all Biggles had seen was the pair of baleful eyes, for in the dry grass, with the tiger lying flat, the striped skin was perfectly camouflaged.

"Got him?" whispered Biggles.

"Yes. Go ahead, old boy. Let him have it."

"I'll take him as he lies. If I don't kill him outright he'll either charge or make for the jungle, in which case you'll get a running shot. Are you ready?"

"All set."

"Then stand by to move fast."

In dead silence, a silence that could almost be felt, very slowly Biggles brought the butt of the rifle to his shoulder and took aim midway between the eyes still glaring at him. Knowing what the result would be if he missed he took time. At last, holding his breath, he squeezed the trigger.

The weapon crashed.

At the report, with an ear-shattering roar the tiger leapt vertically into the air, showing its full length. Sure it would now charge Biggles slammed in another cartridge and braced himself to receive it.

Instead of coming for him the animal seemed to have become possessed by a thousand devils, tearing in mighty bounds this way and that in demoniac rage, making the most appalling noise of roars and snarls. At such speed did it move and so unpredictable were the directions of its bounds that Biggles was never given a reasonable chance for another shot. He held his fire.

He guessed what had happened. His bullet had struck the beast in the head,

damaging its brain without killing it. All he could do was wait for the creature to stop its mad gyrations.

"Wait," he told Bertie, crisply. "He may collapse. If he doesn't—"

He got no further. It almost seemed that the tiger understood what he had said. At all events it must have heard the voice, for it whirled round to face him and instantly charged. What followed happened faster than it can be told. In two leaps the tiger had covered the twenty yards that separated them. Then, towering up on its hind legs it reached out with its claws to pull Biggles down.

Biggles didn't move. There was no time. With the muzzle of the rifle almost touching the tiger's chest he fired, and the next second went over backwards with the tiger on top of him. This occurred in an instant of time and there was never any question of reloading.

Bertie appeared to act on sheer impulse rather than from thought. He jumped in close, lunged the bayonet to the hilt just behind the tiger's shoulder and pulled his trigger at the same time.

Whether it was this stab and bullet that killed the tiger, or Biggles' final shot at point blank range, was never known. It lay still, asprawl, with Biggles, underneath it, thrusting at the tiger with both hands as he strove desperately to get free.

Dropping his rifle Bertie seized Biggles by the hands and tried to pull him clear, but was having difficulty in doing so, for the man-eater must have weighed in the order of four hundred pounds, when help arrived in the persons of the two Gond hunters who had brought them to the village. In doing this they showed courage of the highest order, for at this juncture it was by no means certain that the beast was dead. Anyway, with their combined efforts the three of them managed to get Biggles free and on his feet. As soon as this was done the Gond with the "gas-pipe" gun made sure of things by firing it into the tiger's ear, and, to make doubly sure, slashed it across the throat with his *kukri*.

"Are you all right, old boy?" Bertie asked Biggles anxiously.

"I don't know," panted Biggles, weakly. "I think so." His face was pale and there were blood-stains all down the front of his khaki drill tunic shirt. He examined himself. "Where's all this blood coming from?"

Bertie had a look. "Can't see anything, old boy. Must be tiger's blood."

"Phew! I thought he'd got me. He must have been dead when he flattened me out. What did you do? I heard your shot but I couldn't see."

"I pushed the old bodkin home and pulled the trigger."

"Thanks. It was a nasty moment when I found myself going over. I shall never forget the stink of his breath as he flopped on top of me. That spot of tiger hunting will last me for a long time." Biggles sat down on the tiger, mopped his face and lit a cigarette with a hand that was not quite steady. He picked up his rifle and looked around. "Where's that wretched woman?"

"They've carried her up to the houses."

"Now you see what it means to have a man-eater operating in your back

garden.”

By this time it seemed as if the entire village had arrived on the scene and there was a good deal of noise as men, women and children, gave vent to their hatred of the dead man-eater by stabbing it, kicking it and calling it names.

“I could do with a drink,” said Biggles. He grinned feebly. “Nothing like having a tiger fall on top of you to give you a thirst. Let’s get along to the houses.”

“While I wouldn’t exactly call it a slice of cake, old boy, we could hardly have timed our arrival better,” remarked Bertie as, surrounded by a throng of congratulating villagers they walked back to where they had left their kit, Bira Shah and Mata Dhinn clearing the way with an air of importance at having been party to the liquidation of the man-eater.

“After knocking off the local menace for ‘em, this chap, Ram Shan, should fairly jump to do anything you ask him,” asserted Bertie. “What seems to be amusing ‘em?”

“I think it’s your eyeglass.” Some of the children had, as children will, imitated Bertie, the mighty hunter, by fixing sundry objects in one of their eyes.

Arrived at the houses the village showed its gratitude by producing bowls of goats’ milk. After a few minutes for rest and refreshment Biggles asked Bira Shah to produce Ram Shan as he wanted to talk to him.

Presently the man was brought, and to him Biggles explained his purpose in coming to the village. Would he, Ram Shan, guide them to the place where Toxan sahib had his camp? Could he find his way to it?

Ram Shan, an elderly man, said he could, and would.

“How long will it take us to reach it?” asked Biggles.

The journey, he was assured, could be made in one day, if they started early. It would be better to do that, advised Ram Shan, than start at once, which would mean spending the night in the jungle.

As it was now well into the afternoon, and as there appeared to be no particular urgency, to this Biggles agreed. He had already made a long march that day. It would be better to start fresh, he told Bertie. “There’s one thing we might do,” he added.

“What’s that?”

“If one of these fellows will take it I could send a note to Algy and Ginger telling them how things stand. They will hardly expect us to have shot the tiger already, with the result that we’re starting for Toxan’s camp with Ram Shan in the morning. It might be a good thing to let them know that. Put their minds at rest. If nothing else it’ll be a relief to them to know we got here all right.”

“Jolly good scheme, old boy. They’re bound to be a bit worried. But who will you get to take it?”

This was soon settled. On their two Gond friends being consulted Mata Dhinn at once volunteered to take the note himself. He knew the way to the

lake. It was no trouble. He admitted frankly that he would rather go to it than to Toxan's camp, for Ram Shan had told him where it was, and it had the reputation of being an evil place, which was why it was seldom visited. To go to the lake would be no trouble. As it would in any case mean spending a night in the jungle he would start at once so as to arrive in good time the next day.

This being agreed Biggles tore a leaf from his notebook, wrote the message, folded it and handed it to the Gond hunter. "You shall be rewarded when we have finished here," he promised.

Mata Dhinn reminded Biggles that he had shot the tiger and for that they were all grateful. It was sufficient reward. He set off on his journey forthwith.

"Well, that seems to be all we can do for the present," Biggles told Bertie. "We'll turn in early."

"Are you feeling all right?" asked Bertie, looking hard at him.

"A bit shaky, that's all. Only shock. It'll soon wear off. But it would have been a different story if the tiger had had a kick left in him when he fell on me."

"Never mind, old boy, you got your tiger."

"I'm not so sure of that. You might have got him."

"What say we share him!"

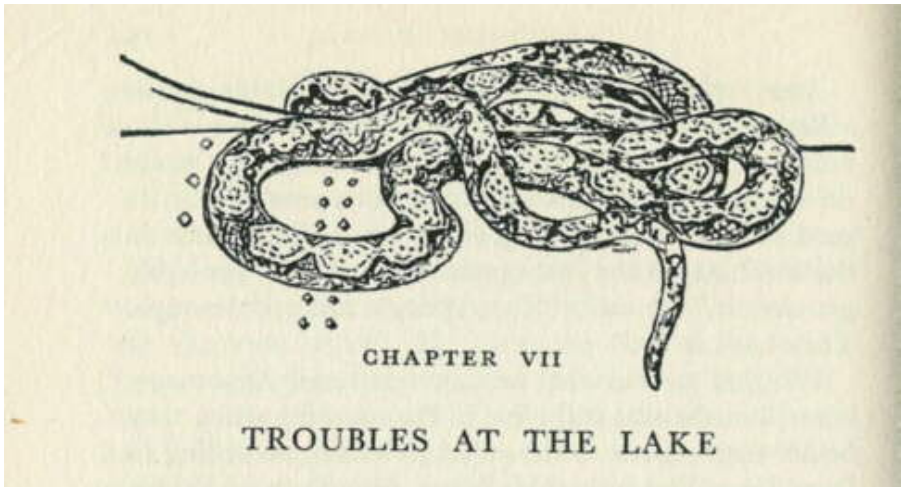
"That's okay with me. Now let's get some shut-eye."

They spent the night, rather uncomfortably, in the village, for they could hear the moans of the woman who had been mauled. There was nothing they could do for her, but Biggles asked Bertie to remind him to send some antiseptic along, from the medicine chest in the machine, at the first opportunity. "She'll probably get over it," he said. "These people are pretty tough. They have to be."

Whether or not the woman recovered they never knew, but she was still alive in the morning when they began their march to the *nullah* in which, according to Ram Shan, Toxan had his camp. Bira Shah told them confidently that she would be all right because the wound had been rubbed with a piece of tiger fat, the best medicine of all. He himself had managed to get some of the tiger's whiskers. They were a wonderful protection against danger.

Biggles did not dispute it. As he said quietly to Bertie, if you believe in a medicine it probably works.

CHAPTER VII



FOR Algy and Ginger, left at the lake, the day following the departure of Biggles and Bertie began badly. They had decided overnight to do no flying for twenty-four hours. For one thing, in view of their previous failures there seemed little point in it. Rather than waste petrol it would be better to give Biggles time to do whatever was resolved by the circumstances in which he found himself on arrival at the Gond village.

The first night, the night Biggles and Bertie passed in the forest, went off without any trouble except that Ginger developed a slight headache, an unusual disorder for him. However, he said nothing about it. He put it down to the heat.

At sunrise, the weather remaining fine, going to the lake for water to boil for tea, happening to glance at the aircraft as a matter of course without expecting to find anything amiss, he noticed that something seemed to have happened to it. It had taken on a slight list and the tail unit appeared to be rather low in the water.

It did not take long to ascertain the cause. On the rear of the hull, just forward of the fin was a large, multi-coloured mass, which on closer inspection revealed itself to be the biggest snake he had ever seen outside a zoological garden. He identified it as a python. Lying coiled, its head somewhere inside its neatly wrapped folds, it was doing no harm. Motionless, it might have been asleep—and probably was.

Ginger returned to the tent. "Good thing we didn't plan to make an early morning recce," he announced.

"Why?"

"Come and take a look."

Together they walked to the water. "What about that beauty?" inquired Ginger, in a curious voice, smiling at Algy's expression. "What does one do

in a case like this?" he inquired.

"Would you believe that?" growled Algy. "With hundreds of miles of forest and millions of trees to choose from, why does the confounded thing have to roost there?"

"Maybe because it's nice and warm in the sun." Ginger smiled again. "It probably doesn't realize it's sitting on an aircraft."

"It's no laughing matter."

"Pythons are pretty harmless, according to Biggles, while you keep out of their way. I've heard they can't crush unless they can get a purchase on a tree or something with their tail."

"They kill by constriction. If we disturbed it, and it did a bit of constricting round our tail unit, in a couple of shakes the machine'd look like a heap of firewood. We'd better leave it alone and give it a chance to move off in its own time."

"Meanwhile the machine's out of action."

"It is as far as I'm concerned. I'm not going near it while that thing's in charge."

"If we started the engines the noise might scare it off."

"It might bolt into the cockpit. That would be even less funny."

"What about giving the cable a tug? If it feels the thing move it might drop off."

"More likely start chucking its weight about with ideas of killing the thing it's on."

Ginger shrugged. "Well, what do we do? It might be there all day."

"All day! Don't fool yourself. If it's recently had a feed it might be there for a month."

"In that case we'd better do something about it."

"Yes. But what?"

"I don't know. But we'd be in a nice mess if we wanted the machine in a hurry and that overgrown worm was still on it."

"You haven't answered my question. What do you suggest we do to get rid of it?"

"It's no use asking me. I'm no snake charmer. Let's leave it for a bit. It may push off."

This optimistic hope did not materialize. When half an hour later they returned, having had breakfast, the snake was still there, still in the same position.

"It's no use," muttered Algy. "The brute's too comfortable to move. We shall have to do something."

"Go ahead."

Algy whistled. Nothing happened. He called. The snake took no notice. In desperation Algy picked up a piece of dead stick and threw it. It hit the snake, but the creature itself might have been made of wood for all the effect it had.

Ginger, becoming impatient, laid hands on the mooring rope and gave it a

sharp pull. That did it.

Finding itself disturbed the snake produced a head from somewhere within its massive coils and looked around. Then, observing that it was in some strange manner moving, it began to glide off its resting place into the shallow water; yard after yard of it until Ginger thought it would never end. The head appeared above water, moving gracefully towards the spot where he and Algy were standing. They retired at some speed, and from a safe distance watched the python, not in the least upset, coil quietly into the jungle.

"Thank goodness for that," said Algy. "I hope he stays there. We don't want him in the tent in the middle of the night."

"I wish you wouldn't think of such horrors," protested Ginger.

More trouble, of a different sort, was on the way.

They were sitting quietly in the shade, rather bored with doing nothing when, hearing a slight rustling noise not far away Ginger went to investigate. He caught his breath when he saw what appeared to be a line of phantom black omnibuses moving swiftly through gloom under the trees. The shadowy figures turned out to be elephants, large and small. They passed on. Silence returned. Ginger went back to Algy and told him what he had seen.

"What of it?" inquired Algy. "We knew there were elephants in the forest."

"I know. But these lads weren't feeding, or just strolling. They were on their way in a hurry."

"Well?"

"I think something must have scared them to cause them to move like that."

"As long as it doesn't come this way I don't care.

It may have been us that startled them. I mean, they may have winded us."

Ginger agreed that might be the explanation.

He changed his mind a little while later when he heard different sounds, sounds that made him sit bolt upright in a listening attitude. He nudged Algy. "Am I imagining things or can I hear voices?"

Algy listened. "You can hear voices," he confirmed. "So can I."

The sounds came nearer.

"Whoever they are they're coming this way," asserted Ginger.

"More native hunters, probably."

Ginger stood up to look.

To his concern, if not alarm, he saw at a distance of thirty or forty yards not fewer than six men. From their attitudes they had come out of the jungle and had just noticed the aircraft. Standing in a bunch they were staring at it as if in astonishment, as was understandable. Had these men been native Indians Ginger would not have been concerned; but they were not. Their faces were enough to tell him that. Had proof been needed the uniforms they wore would have provided it, for although Ginger had never before seen them in reality he had seen them often enough in pictures. They were the drab, padded clothes of the Chinese Communist army. Every man carried a rifle.

Ginger knew they must have seen him the moment he moved, but they remained still, talking in low tones, obviously discussing the situation.

Said Algy, who was still seated and therefore could not see the men: "What are you staring at?"

"We have company," answered Ginger, quietly.

"Who?"

"Chinese troops."

"How many?"

"I can see six."

"What are they doing?" Algy lost no time in getting to his feet.

"Talking. Talking about us, I imagine."

Algy joined Ginger. "I don't think much of this," he muttered. "These must be the lot those two Gonds spoke about. They've been looking for somebody for some time, and Biggles, you remember, was pretty sure it could only be Mr. Poo. They've come down from Thibet. They've no right to be here and they must know it. Thousands of feet below the plateau they couldn't even make the excuse they'd lost their way."

"They're not likely to interfere with us," said Ginger, although there was no confidence in his voice.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that."

"But there's no reason why they should trouble us."

"If they got the idea we were something to do with the Indian government, and might send down word that they were here—well, that wouldn't suit 'em, you may be sure."

"Here they come, anyway."

As Ginger had observed, the Chinese were now advancing, in single file, led by a man who, from a cipher on his sleeve, was the officer or N.C.O. in charge. Coming up to where Algy and Ginger were standing he bowed the customary salutation of his people.

Algy acknowledged the salute and waited for him to speak.

The man said something, but as he spoke in his own language the words conveyed nothing.

All Algy could do was shake his head to indicate he did not understand.

The man pointed to his mouth.

"Don't say he's asking for food," murmured Ginger.

"With a lake beside him it obviously isn't water he wants."

"Are you going to give him some food?"

"Not likely."

"Why not?"

"Why should we help invaders? Anyway, we've none to spare. If we gave them food it could be a case of Ethelred the Unready and the Danes. They're six mouths to fill. A tin of biscuits would go nowhere with that lot. If we gave them anything they'd finish by wanting all we have. This is a try-on."

Again Algy shook his head, whereupon the man made a move towards the

tent. Algy stopped him. "You can't go in there," he said sharply.

Touching his eyes the man made a signal that he only wanted to look.

"I can guess why he wants to look," said Algy softly. "He wants to see if we have a certain person inside. As we haven't I might as well let him have a dekho, in the hope that if he's satisfied he'll push off."

As he finished speaking he beckoned, and throwing open the flap of the tent invited the man to look inside.

The man looked. All there was to see was a neat pile of blankets, a spirit stove, a kettle and a teapot. There was no food, this, of course, being in the machine. After a glance the man withdrew.

Algy made a significant gesture towards the distant mountains, as much as to say, get back to where you belong.

This may, or may not, have been interpreted correctly. The man's face gave no indication. It remained coldly impassive. He rejoined his men and gave an order, whereupon, to Ginger's relief, they all marched off in the direction from which they had come, keeping close to the side of the lake where the jungle was less thick than in the forest.

Algy and Ginger watched in silence until they disappeared in the undergrowth. Then Algy said: "I don't like this. Pity Biggles isn't handy so that I could let him know."

"They've gone."

"That's what it looks like but I wouldn't bet on it. They're looking of course for Mr. Poo."

"They couldn't possibly guess we're here on the same job."

"They must be wondering what on earth we're doing here with an aircraft."

"You think they might come back?"

"I think they may watch us to find out what we're doing. They're short of rations, and they must know we couldn't stay here without food of some sort. They also know they've no right to be here. If that were known in certain quarters there'd be trouble."

"At all events, if they're looking for Mr. Poo it's a comfort to know they haven't found him yet. If they had they'd be on their way back to Thibet."

"That doesn't mean they won't find him. According to what the Gonds said they've been about here for some time, so apparently they're determined to get him. The truth may be they daren't go home without him. The Communist bosses take a dim view of failure."

"Why all this fuss over one man?"

"Mr. Poo may know too much. Then, as we know, he was a rich man. He wouldn't be able to carry all his wealth with him when he bolted so they may suspect he hid his treasure somewhere. Naturally, they'd want to know where, and they wouldn't be above torturing him to make him tell. But what does it matter. As far as we're concerned it's enough to know they're still here. It gives me an uncomfortable feeling to know they're in the vicinity."

"How about getting airborne to see if they've really gone? If they've kept

to the side of the lake there's a chance we might spot them."

"If they saw the machine in the air they might come back and ransack the tent."

"There isn't much to ransack."

"They might burn the tent from spite because we wouldn't give them food. I don't feel like leaving it unguarded. There's always a chance that Biggles may come back in a hurry. If you like you can do a circuit of the lake to see if you can spot them but I shall stay here."

"Okay, I'll do that," decided Ginger. "I'd sleep more comfortably if I knew that bunch had really cleared off. I shouldn't be away more than five minutes." He went to the mooring and pulled the machine in.

In the event his trip took him less than the estimated five minutes, for almost at once he saw the Chinese at the western end of the lake, still marching. He was puzzled by being able to count eight men, until he made out that two of them were dark-skinned natives.

He turned back at once and gave Algy the news. "Either they had a couple of natives with them, who kept in the background when they came here, or they picked them up on the way."

"Which way were they going?"

"They were heading west when I last saw them. What does it matter as long as they've gone?"

"I was thinking..."

"Thinking what?"

"That's the direction of Toxan's camp."

Ginger shrugged. "It's enough for me that they've gone. I take it we do no more aviating today?"

"I don't see much point in it. I think we'd better stick around."

"That's okay with me. Now we can relax," agreed Ginger.

CHAPTER VIII



CHAPTER VIII GINGER DROPS IN

THE next morning brought another perfect day. It would have been surprising only had it been otherwise, for, as Ginger knew, with the monsoon past, this weather was likely to continue for months. The ethereal loveliness of the dawn, with its opalescent tints of violet, grey and gold, never failed to hold him spellbound. This, he pondered, was what the world could be, was intended to be, not the hurly-burly that restless men had made of it.

His first remark to Algy was: "If Biggles reached the village yesterday he should by now have seen Ram Shan and come to some arrangement. If Ram Shan agreed to act as guide he might even now be on his way to Toxan's camp."

"It's more likely he's out hunting the tiger that has kept Ram Shan at home."

"Even if he still refused to leave the village Ram Shan could have no objection to telling Biggles where he saw Toxan digging, in which case Biggles might go without him."

Algy shook his head as he poured himself a cup of tea. "I doubt it. As Biggles himself said, in this sort of country it's one thing to have a description of a place, but a different matter to find it."

"When we've washed up how about having a look round from up topsides? Biggles said we could."

"It's too early. We don't know how far it is from the village to Toxan's camp but it must be a fair distance or the two Gonds who came here would have known more about it. It struck me as a bit odd that they'd never been to it."

"No doubt they had a reason for that."

"Could be. Anyhow, even if he's started Biggles couldn't have got there yet. We might have a look round later. I'm glad those Chinese didn't come back. I don't mind admitting that six of 'em, all armed with rifles, had me a

bit worried. I suggest we do a short recce around lunchtime to see if there's anything doing."

"Okay."

It was left at that, but shortly before noon they made a reconnaissance lasting about twenty minutes, sufficient for them to survey a good deal of ground. Seeing nothing unusual they returned to their temporary base.

They were having a late, not very appetizing lunch of bully beef and biscuits when, to their surprise, up walked the Gond hunter, Mata Dhinn, trailing his *bundook*¹ and carrying a piece of paper in the end of a cleft stick—the usual jungle way of delivering a message. Naturally, at first they thought something serious must have happened, and Algy made haste to grab the note.

"Listen to this," he requested, when he had read it. "It's from Biggles. He's killed the tiger!"

"Great snakes! That was quick work."

"He's starting in the morning with Ram Shan for Toxan's camp. He wrote this yesterday, so that means today. He must be well on his way by now. He says according to Ram Shan the camp is only a short day's march. When he arrives he'll make smoke to show us where he is. We can take a photo to pinpoint the spot for future reference. We can expect another runner when he has further news."

"That's grand. At last we seem to be getting somewhere. It didn't take him long to get the tiger. What a slice of cake. It must have been waiting for him."

"No, sahib, it did not wait. It was walking away with a woman in its mouth." Mata Dhinn, with refreshment in his hand, explained what had happened, in his enthusiasm making a colourful story, as natives so often will, with a few details supplied by his imagination. He sprang to his feet to demonstrate how Bertie had bayoneted the evil one.

Said Algy, when he had finished: "Did you yourself speak to Ram Shan?"

"I did, sahib. We had much talk."

"Did you hear him tell Biggles sahib where Toxan had made his camp?"

"He told me of this himself."

"Do you know the place?"

"I do, sahib. It is called the Nullah Tangla. It is a bad place for a man to go. There are many dangers. There, long ago, I was nearly killed by a bear, so I have never been back. It was my fault. I was young and without experience."

"How was it your fault?" asked Ginger, curiously.

"He was above me when I shot at him. That was bad."

"Why?"

"When you hunt a bear, sahib, never make him angry if he is above you. He comes fast down the hill, but cannot go so fast up the hill. Thus it is also with snakes. Always be above when you attack."²

"Tell me about this place, Mata Dhinn," requested Algy.

"It is a *khora*, sahib, a *nullah*,³ very long and deep. There are many rocks, with holes in which many bears live. A bad place where a man can be trapped

if the rains come suddenly.”

“How far would it be from here to this place?” asked Algy.

Mata Dhinn could not give the distance in miles but he thought it was not a great distance.

“In which direction.”

The Gond pointed to the west.

“I fancy I’ve seen this place,” said Ginger, thoughtfully. “There are plenty of gorges, but every time we’ve been over I’ve noticed an extra big one. For that reason I was able to have a good look at it, but I never saw a movement. The bottom is fairly open but I can’t remember seeing any water in it.”

“Some water stays always in the rocks, sahib, if what Ram Shan tells me is true.”

“Could you recognize this *nullah* from the air?”

Mata Dhinn said he thought he could.

“Would you come with us in the plane and show it to us?” inquired Algy.

“Yes, sahib.”

“Have you ever flown before?”

“No, sahib.”

“You’re not afraid?”

“No, sahib. If it was dangerous you would not fly,” averred the Indian with simple logic.

“Good. Then let us go and look at this bad place.”

“Biggles sahib cannot be there yet,” Mata Dhinn pointed out.

“No matter. We shall know where to look for him when he does arrive. You are not in a hurry to return to your village?”

“No, sahib.”

“You must have travelled fast and may need a rest.”

“No. I will go when you are ready.”

It was about three o’clock when the aircraft took off on what was intended to be a short run merely to mark the position of the *nullah*. For this purpose Mata Dhinn sat beside Algy in the cockpit. Things did not, however, turn out as expected, for no sooner was the machine airborne than a considerable volume of smoke could be seen rising from a point about twelve miles away.

“Is that the place of Toxan sahib’s camp?” Algy asked Mata Dhinn.

“It is the place.”

“Gould it be that Ram Shan has arrived?”

“No.”

“You are sure it wouldn’t be possible?” queried Algy, heading towards the smoke.

“I am sure it would not be possible.”

“Not even if he travelled fast?”

“He could not arrive at the *nullah* before sundown.”

“Then what is causing the smoke?”

“Not know.”

Said Ginger, from behind: "In any event Biggles wouldn't be likely to make a fire that size—unless he accidentally set the forest alight."

"One wouldn't think so," agreed Algy. "We may know more about it when we've had a closer look."

Within five minutes the machine was over the objective. Seen from a low altitude it was, as Mata Dhinn had said, a forbidding gorge, altogether larger and deeper than Ginger had supposed. On previous flights he had seen it only from their usual cruising height of two or three thousand feet in order to get a wide view.

Now, from under five hundred feet it was possible to look right into what was in effect a great gash across the foot of a steep slope, a split in the earth's crust. Mixed jungle, scrub and small trees, covered everything, except where the walls rose sheer and in the extreme bottom, which appeared to be mostly sand or gravel having been swept clean by the periodic monsoon spates, which prevented any sort of vegetation from gaining a foothold. At the moment no water was to be seen. The base of the *nullah* varied between thirty and fifty yards in width. At the top, of course, it was a good deal wider. The whole thing ran fairly straight, with only one or two slight bends.

The source of the smoke was at once apparent. An area of two or three acres of scrub, spreading from the bottom of the ravine to half-way up a rocky slope, was burning, the fire having started all along the base.

"What do you make of that?" Ginger asked Algy.

"I haven't a clue, unless Toxan, hearing us, lit a little fire and it got out of hand."

"That would go for Biggles, if by some miracle he had arrived. I can't imagine either Toxan or Biggles starting a fire that size. Anyway, if either of them were there surely they'd be standing in the open, where they'd be plain to see, looking up at us and waving. I can't see a soul."

Algy looked at the Gond sitting beside him. "Are you sure this is the place?"

"Yes, sahib. This is the place."

"Could such a fire start by accident?"

Mata Dhinn said he thought not. He admitted he couldn't understand it.

"Neither can I," stated Algy. "If you're sure this is the place there's something mighty queer about it."

"It'd be a strange coincidence if a fire started itself at the very place where we were expecting to see smoke," asserted Ginger. "Can't you go a bit lower?"

"I'll tell you what," answered Algy. "The flying may be a bit tricky but I'll start at one end and shoot right through the *nullah*. Then, if Toxan's camp is there we're bound to see it. There's a chance he may be away at the moment, digging. Hold tight, Mata Dhinn; in this thin hot air we may bump about a bit."

So saying Algy banked steeply and took the machine to the far end of the

gorge, which might have been two or three miles long, becoming shallower at each end where jungle again took possession, the actual watercourse disappearing under the trees.

Algy turned into it, and sideslipping off some height, holding the machine down began to race through it with the forest flashing past on both sides anything from two to three hundred feet above them. Luckily the gorge was fairly straight, so the operation was not so hair-raising as it would have been had it had any sharp turns in it. Even so it called for careful flying.

The only real risk was air currents that might for a moment throw the machine out of control with insufficient room for recovery; a “sinker” which could cause the aircraft to hit the floor of the ravine, or an up- current that might bump it into the trees on one side or the other.

None of these things happened, however, and after a nervous couple of minutes Algy zoomed out of the far end. He had seen nothing, for the simple reason he had been too occupied with what he was doing to look.

“See anything?” he called to Ginger, as he banked steeply to repeat the performance if necessary.

“Yes. There’s a man lying on the sand. He didn’t move as we shot over him so I think he must be dead.”

“Are you sure?”

“It is true, sahib. I saw him,” said Mata Dhinn.

“Did it look like a white man?”

“No.”

“What did he look like—an Indian?”

“No, sahib.”

“He looked to me mightily like a Chinese soldier,” said Ginger.

“My God! Don’t tell me those troops we saw have found their way here and mopped up the camp!”

“That’s what it looks like. If that man I saw is dead there must have been fighting. Now I come to think of it I saw two Indians with those troops who came to us; I told you at the time; they may have known about Toxan and guided the Chinese to it.”

“I’ll run through again. You may see something else.”

“Okay.”

Algy, tense at the control column, made the return dash down the gorge. “Well?” he called, as he pulled up at the far end and went into a tight circle.

“I saw another body, an Indian I think, and a smouldering mark as if it might have been Toxan’s camp, burnt out. This is the place all right. There are the trenches where Toxan, I imagine, has been digging for rubies. No one else would be likely to dig here.”

“Then it looks like a bad show.”

“Fraid so.”

“There’s nothing we can do about it.”

After a moment or two Ginger replied: “I could go down.”

"I'm not trying to get down on the floor of that hole," said Algy emphatically.

"I wasn't suggesting that you did."

"Then what did you mean?"

"We've got a broolly. I could drop in."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"I hope not. But as I see it the camp has been raided, and it's hard to imagine anyone except those Chinese troops doing it. There's been a fight. That's obvious. The attackers have pulled out, probably taking Mr. Poo with them. Toxan wouldn't give him up without a struggle. He may be down there, somewhere, wounded. We can't just do nothing about it."

"Biggles should be along presently."

"Presently! He won't be here till sundown, and that's three to four hours away. By that time it may be too late to do any good. There are others beside Toxan, don't forget. We know he had two Gurkhas with him, and Mr. Poo's Thibetan servant. What do you say?"

"I don't like it, but it's up to you. How are you going to get back to the lake?"

"The same way as Biggles, whatever that may be, when he comes. He'll have to get back."

"What good can you do?" argued Algy.

"I can stuff some surgical dressings from the medicine chest in my pocket and take care of anyone who may be down there until Biggles comes. I wouldn't suggest going in but for Biggles being on the way here."

"Okay. I'll leave it to you. It's your funeral. What do you want me to do?"

"Give me a couple of minutes to get into the harness and then fly over the gorge as slowly as you dare. You'll feel me go. That won't be anywhere near that bush fire. I don't want to drop into that."

"Fair enough. Yell when you're ready."

This did not call for an answer so Ginger made haste with his preparations. Into the pockets of his jacket he jammed the few things he thought might be useful. He then got into the parachute and opened the cabin door.

"Ready," he shouted.

Again Algy turned the machine to follow the ravine, holding it in a glide as steady as possible. He felt the slight lurch as Ginger jumped clear, and tilting the aircraft to watch his descent held his breath until the fabric mushroomed. Still watching he saw it crumple as Ginger hit the ground, landing almost in the middle of the dry watercourse. He breathed again when Ginger, having slipped his harness, looked up and waved. Then, pale with anxiety and apprehension, as there was nothing more he could do he opened up and headed for the lake.

1 Gun.

2 There are two sorts of Himalayan bear, the black and the red (or brown) the red being less

common and the least dangerous. The black, with a broad white arrow on its chest which it shows when it stands on its hind legs, can be an ugly customer if molested, but as a general rule he will rarely attack a man unless wounded or in self-defence. Nevertheless, his temper is unpredictable, and natives usually give him a wide berth.

3 *Khora* and *nullah* really mean the same thing, a ravine or gorge. *Nullah*, from the Hindi word *nala*, usually, but not necessarily, means a dry watercourse.

CHAPTER IX

CHAPTER IX DEATH IN THE NULLAH



IF Algy was satisfied to see Ginger touch down safely Ginger himself was even more relieved, for he knew the risks he was taking in making a “free” drop into such a confined space. A draught of hot air funnelling through the gorge might have swung him against a face of rock or carried him into the tall trees which topped the slopes on either side. He had been more afraid of an accident of this sort, which might incapacitate him, than of anything that might happen after he was on the ground.

Stepping out of his harness he gave Algy a wave to show he was all right. Then, as the machine turned away, he made a neat bundle of the parachute and pushed it well into the shade of a bush from where it could easily be recovered later. This done he looked about him and observed that the place was not too bad after all, certainly not as difficult for walking as it had looked from the air.

The floor, the actual watercourse, now dry, was mostly sand or shingle, with outcrops of rock, and loose boulders of various sizes, that had been washed down by spates, lying at intervals. Rocks and sundry debris extended some little way up the banks, showing the high water mark in times of flood. Occasionally the sides of the gorge were precipitous but more often they sloped back at an angle and were covered with scrub or a tangle of jungle. The heat in the bottom of the ravine was formidable. He looked and listened, but he could see no one.

Rather than risk falling into the burning scrub he had taken care to jump some distance from it; which meant he had also landed some little distance from what he had thought to be bodies, which were not far apart. So, with the drone of the aircraft receding, reminding him that he was now alone, keeping a watchful eye open he set off towards them on a tour of inspection. There were signs of digging, holes and trenches, in many places, as was to be expected after the length of time the lone prospector had spent trying to find

the source of the rubies.

Presently he came to what had obviously been the site of the camp, close to a hollow rock face into which, into a little pool, trickled water from a spring somewhere above. The camp was now a heap of burnt, blackened wreckage, only a few metal cooking utensils and digging tools having escaped the fire. Several expended cartridge cases showed that Toxan had put up a fight. His rifle was not there. Nor, to Ginger's relief, was his body, which he had been prepared to find.

He went on and soon came upon the first casualty, a native whom he took to be one of Toxan's Gurkhas. He was dead, having been shot and afterwards mutilated. A little farther on lay another body, and he saw that he had been right. It was that of a Chinese soldier. He, too, had been shot. Ginger, moved by these signs of tragedy, walked on, until, rounding a slight bend, he came within sight of the fire. There he stopped, as it seemed pointless to continue. He looked at the fire. It was burning slowly, making more smoke than flame, the brake, dwarf bamboo and bush, that comprised the scrub evidently being green and damp in the bottom. The belt was the best part of two hundred yards from end to end. It was burning from the lowest part upwards, and for the first time it struck him as odd that the fire should be burning for its entire length, yet moving up the slope. How could that happen, he pondered, unless the fire had been started in several places at once? Started at one place it would burn straight upwards, obviously the direction of the up-current of air that was carrying the smoke towards the lip of the ravine. It would hardly burn horizontally first, and then turn upward.

From these puzzling reflections he was jerked in no uncertain manner when two bears burst from the smoke on the side nearest to him and came bundling up the ravine directly towards him at a lumbering gallop. Harmless they might be in the ordinary way, but apparently having been smoked out of their lairs it seemed likely they would take a poor view of anyone who got in their way. Ginger did not wait to see. He bolted. As he ran he remembered what Mata Dhinn had said about the advisability of getting above an angry bear, whereupon he turned at right angles and went up the slope in the manner of a mountain goat.

Having reached what he considered to be a safe height he turned to watch what the bears would do. He might not have existed for all the notice they took of him. Making a funny grunting noise they rushed straight on until they reached the body of the Chinese soldier, which they must have winded, for they rose up on their hind legs as if to charge, or ward off an attack. When the body did not move the leading bear went up to it, sniffed it, fetched it a swipe with a paw and galloped on. The other followed. Both disappeared round the bend and Ginger saw no more of them.

He had taken out his handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his face, for the heat reflected from the bare earth and rocks was stifling, when the rattle of a rolling stone made him turn. The sight that met his eyes stiffened him rigid. A

dozen yards away a rifle was pointing at him from behind a boulder. Behind the rifle were two dark eyes in a brown face, the forehead bound in a strip of blood-stained rag; lank black hair hung over it, completing a picture that would have frightened anyone.

Ginger raised his hands to show they were empty. "Don't shoot," he said quickly, without having the least idea of who or what the man was, or if he would understand what he had said.

The face rose a little higher above the rock that had half concealed it. "Englishman," said a voice.

"Yes, I'm English," answered Ginger, not a little relieved.

The man raised the rifle and stepped clear of the rock. "You look for Toxan sahib?" he queried.

"Yes. I came here hoping to find him," replied Ginger. "Do you know where he is? I'm afraid there has been some trouble here."

"Much trouble. Chinese men come."

"Are you one of Captain Toxan's Gurkhas?"

"Yes, sahib. Come. I show."

Ginger followed the man into a little depression surrounded by scrub, and there, on the ground, his head supported by a heap of dry grass, lay a white man, the man, he did not doubt, he had hoped to find. He was elderly, between fifty and sixty Ginger judged, thin and wiry-looking, his skin burnt to the colour of mahogany by the Indian sun. He was unshaven. His hair, badly in need of cutting, was grey and untidy.

His eyes were open, and moved, so it was clear at once that he was not dead, although he was obviously in a bad way. He wore no jacket. The upper part of his body was only half covered by a shirt, dark with blood. This had been partly cut away to expose a shoulder that had been bandaged with what Ginger was presently to learn was the Ghurkha's *puggari*. He dropped on his knees beside the wounded man. "Captain Toxan?" he queried.

"That's me. Who are you?" The voice was weak.

"Your letter reached England. I'm one of a party sent to fetch Mr. Poo. Where is he?"

"I'm afraid—they've got him."

Ginger unloaded his medical kit, glad that he had brought it. "Is that wound in your shoulder the only one?"

"Yes. I got a bullet through it."

"While I'm having a look at it you can tell me what happened, if you can manage it."

"The yellow devils came on us out of the blue," began Toxan. "We hadn't a hope from the start. I've been here for years and never had a scrap of trouble with anyone. We'd just come in from digging and were having a rest outside the tent when we saw a couple of men who I took to be Rishis coming down the *nullah*. They're a queer lot, mostly nomadic, but I'd seen some of them before so I thought nothing of it. They'd never been hostile. They stopped,

had a good look at us and went back. I'm pretty certain they showed the Chinese where we were, probably in ignorance, not realizing what they were doing. The next thing we knew a bunch of Chinese troops were on us. There wasn't much we could do. One of my Gurkhas who stood in the way was shot dead. They grabbed poor old Poo. I shot one of 'em, shouting to Poo to bolt and hide in the jungle. He went off with his man while I, with my other Gurkha, Hamid, fought a rearguard action. He was hit in the head and I went down with a bullet through the shoulder. Perhaps they thought we were dead. Perhaps they were only interested in getting their hands on Poo. Anyway, they went off after him, and Hamid, like the good fellow he is, got me here. That's all there was to it."

By this time Ginger had removed the blood-soaked *puggari* and examined the wound. He found the bullet had gone right through the shoulder. There had been a lot of bleeding but this had nearly dried up. "If the bullet didn't touch a lung you should be all right," he said, as he plugged the hole, covered it with lint and rolled on a bandage. "Does that feel more comfortable?"

"Much, thanks."

"How long ago did this happen?"

"About a couple of hours. How did you get here?"

"I dropped in by parachute. We've an aircraft on the lake. What's all that smoke? It was seeing that brought us over."

"Hamid Khan, my man, says the Chinese lit the fire. He was watching them."

"What's the idea of setting the *nullah* on fire?"

"They're obviously trying to smoke him out."

"Smoke who out?"

"Poo. It was into that scrub that Poo bolted with his Thibetan servant while Hamid and I tried to hold 'em back."

"Why smoke them out? Why didn't they go in after them?"

"I imagine they didn't like the bears. That scrub is full of 'em. They live in caves in the rocks. I suppose the caves are the attraction."

"I saw two bears bolt as I came here."

"I'm not surprised. I don't interfere with them and they've never troubled me."

"I feel I ought to do something about Mr. Poo."

"What can you do, single-handed, against that lot?"

"Is he still in that scrub?"

"Hamid thought they were both still in it a short time ago. There has been no shooting, or shouting, as probably there would have been had they broken cover."

Ginger was examining the Gurkha's head and was glad to find only a scalp wound. He put a piece of adhesive plaster on it.

"It isn't the first time he's been wounded," said Toxan. "He served in the 2nd Gurkha Rifles and hasn't forgotten his drill."

Ginger looked at the man and saw that he was typical of his breed, alert, keen-eyed, small and lean, but obviously as tough as a piece of bootleather. Ginger knew, of course, the reputation of the Gurkha as a fighting man.

Wondering why he hadn't seen the Chinese, he asked: "Where are these Chinese soldiers now?"

Hamid explained they were standing in a line along the top fringe of the belt of scrub. With the fire coming towards them Poo and the Thibetan would have to come out or be burnt alive.

"Why didn't I see them from the air?" asked Ginger, puzzled.

"They stand just inside the scrub where they cannot be seen by Poo if he looks out to see if the way is clear. When he comes out they will catch him, sahib."

"We'll see about that," declared Ginger, grimly. "You don't like these Chinese, eh?"

Hamid showed his white teeth in a smile in which there was little humour. He touched his *kukri* significantly, in a way that told Ginger all he needed to know.

Ginger turned back to Toxan. "May I borrow your rifle?"

"Certainly. What are you going to do?"

"If I can have your rifle I'll go and see if I can help Mr. Poo."

"Do. Poor old man. He's a dear old chap. A real gent."

"All right. You be low here. Hamid can take care of you. It won't be for long. Two other members of our party, by name Bigglesworth and Lissie, are on their way here with some Gond guides. They should arrive about sundown. They don't know I'm here—in fact, I'm not supposed to be here—so you can tell them if I'm not back before they turn up. Hamid had better watch for them and bring them here, or they may bump into the Chinese. We've an aircraft on the lake to fly you home."

"Wonderful. What exactly do you intend to do?"

"If I can get hold of Mr. Poo I'll bring him here."

"Be careful. If those devils see you they're liable to shoot you."

"Don't worry about me. I'll do what I can. Don't move more than you must or your wound may start bleeding again."

"Won't you take Hamid with you. He's a fine scout and as brave as they make 'em."

"No thanks. He'd do better to stay here with you, to watch for my friends when they come. If I run into trouble that *kukri* of his wouldn't be much use against rifles." Ginger looked at the Gurkha. "You understand what you're to do?"

"Yes, sahib."

"Keep watch. You might fetch some water. If you hear whistling or calling you'll know my friends have arrived. Tell them I'm here. Bring them along and explain what has happened and what I'm doing. If they ask how I came here you can tell them I dropped in by parachute having seen smoke and

bodies in the *nullah*.”

“Yes, sahib.” The Gurkha saluted.

Toxan was looking hard at Ginger’s face. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Right as rain—why?”

“I thought you looked a bit flushed, that’s all.”

Ginger forced a grin, for in fact his head was aching abominably. “Must be the heat,” he said, casually. “See you later.”

CHAPTER X



CHAPTER X HOT WORK

WITH Toxan's rifle, an old-fashioned but serviceable double-barrelled Rigby, in his hand, and some cartridges in his pocket, Ginger set off, keeping low, heading for the direction of the fire. From his position in some rough jungle he could not see it, but he could hear it crackling, and a rising cloud of smoke revealed the approximate area. His big fear was that he'd be too late, for when he had last seen the fire it was nearly half-way through the scrub.

There was plenty of cover so he could make good progress. What he was going to do when he reached the fire he did not know; he had not thought as far ahead as that; he simply felt he had to do something. It went against his grain to sit and do nothing while an unfortunate old man was carried off to slavery, or worse. He had a vague idea that if he could put himself in a commanding position he would be able to open a delaying fire on the invaders when the old man bolted, as he would have to sooner or later, and so give him a chance to reach a fresh hiding place.

He took into account the possibility of Mr. Poo taking his own life rather than fall into the hands of enemies from whom he could expect no mercy, and this did nothing to ease the burden of his anxiety.

Still on the slope above the floor of the ravine he reached a spot that gave him a view of the burning scrub; but he could see no Chinese soldiers or anyone else. In view of what Hamid had told him he did not expect to. Sure now that he must have arrived too late he moved a little higher in order to be able to see along the top fringe of the scrub. This was the place where something might be expected to happen, if it had not already done so.

To his surprise, and certainly to his satisfaction since it indicated that the fugitives were still in cover, he saw that the troops had moved back into the open. The reason for this was plain to see. They themselves had been forced to retire by low drifting smoke.

Ginger now had a clear picture of the scene of operations. Five Chinese were there, rifles ready, strung out in a line clear of the smoke, twenty or thirty yards apart. The fire now had not more than thirty yards to burn, so it

could only be a matter of minutes before Mr. Poo and his faithful companion were choked by the smoke or burnt by the flames unless they broke cover. Ginger assumed Mr. Poo would then be seized, for he would be no good to his captors if he were dead. They wanted to make him talk.

Another bear bolted. One of the troops shot it, apparently from sheer wantonness, as it tried to get away. The unlucky beast, only wounded, set up a howl that made Ginger flinch. It spun and rolled about until more shots drove it back into the scrub.

This animal, Ginger noticed, had chosen the best place to leave the death-trap, which was not from the top in front of the soldiers, which it may have known were there, but out of the side, the thirty yard interval of unburned bush. Had it gone downhill it might have got away without being seen, for the view of the nearest soldier was blocked by a certain amount of bush and a good deal of smoke. Unfortunately for the poor beast it went uphill, apparently hoping to find safety on high ground, and so, coming within sight of the end soldier of the line, met disaster.

This lesson was not lost on Ginger, who perceived that if Mr. Poo came out at the same place, and went downhill into the smoke of the smouldering ground that had already been burnt, he would have a fair chance of getting clear. That is, unless the soldier moved his position to cover this obvious exit. At least, it was obvious to Ginger, who thought it should also be obvious to the men inside. This, he felt sure, was the way they would come—if they came at all. Why the troops did not cover this weak spot in their arrangement he could not imagine. They were either a simple lot, he concluded, or a cowardly bunch who preferred not to lose sight of each other. Thankful that the fugitives had not yet been caught he waited, tense, knowing the end could not long be delayed.

A few minutes later he saw that his judgement had not been at fault. Some bamboos were parted cautiously and a face looked out, the owner of it apparently surveying the open ground in front of him. This was the piece of rough hillside between the burning scrub and the beginning of the bushes from which Ginger was watching.

There was nothing Ginger could do. To run across, thus exposing himself to the nearest soldier in whose view he would be, was to invite being shot. He dare not shout advice, for if he did the same soldier would hear him. Again, a shout might drive back into cover the man who was evidently contemplating making a break. He would assume the shout came from one of his enemies. So all Ginger could do was watch events, ready to take a hand if and when an opportunity came.

A second face appeared, that of an old man with a long wisp of grey beard. This, Ginger did not doubt, was Mr. Poo. After a pause to make sure the coast was clear the two men emerged and started scrambling across the rough slope. For a minute it looked as if they might get clear without being observed, but when they had gone a dozen yards, by the cruellest of bad luck a sudden slant

of wind lifted the smoke and the soldier saw them. He let out a yell and came pelting after them. To make calamity worse, Mr. Poo, unsteady on his legs, stumbled and fell. Shaken, he seemed to have some difficulty in getting up. The Thibetan, who must have realized that all was lost, instead of running on alone as he might have done, and so succeeded in getting away, gallantly stood his ground with his arms folded across his chest to await the end.

Mr. Poo rose painfully to his feet. Neither man carried a weapon. They made no attempt to defend themselves.

The soldier slowed his pace, and on reaching the fugitives, for no reason at all that Ginger could see, struck the Thibetan in the face, knocking him down. He then stood looking down at him, laughing.

This, Ginger perceived, was the chance for which he had waited. It was obviously a case of now or never, and equally obviously no occasion for gentle methods. Nor, for that matter, after what he had seen was he in a mood for half measures. Taking careful aim at the soldier he fired. At such short range he could hardly miss. Nor did he. The man staggered a few paces and slumped down in a heap. In a flash Ginger had jumped into the open waving his arms and shouting: "This way. Run."

The two refugees, seeing help so close as if it might have dropped from heaven—as in a way it had— moved with alacrity. The Thibetan helped Mr. Poo to his feet and they started across the gap, the old man stumbling on the loose stones and generally making heavy weather of it. Ginger retired into cover, paying more attention to the top of the scrub, knowing that his shot would bring more enemies along to see what was happening. It did.

Before the two were half-way across the open ground another soldier appeared round the corner. He saw them, and with a yell came bounding down the slope to cut them off. This offered a difficult shot and Ginger held his fire, waiting for him to stop. This he did when he intercepted the runners just before they reached the cover from which Ginger was watching. The man wore on his face a frozen grin so diabolical that he might have been about to kill an enemy who had done him a mortal injury instead of an old man who had harmed nobody.

His whole attitude and expression reminded Ginger of one of those hideous ceremonial masks sometimes worn by oriental dancers. His feverish condition may have been partly responsible, but the spectacle filled him with such horror and loathing that he might have been looking not at a human being but at a monster from another world. The soldier, showing his teeth, behaved like one. He struck the Thibetan with the butt of his rifle, knocking him down.

To Ginger the scene was no longer real. For the last few seconds he had stood like a man stricken with paralysis. Now, actuated by fury, life and movement returned to his limbs. From a range of ten yards he deliberately shot the man. He had no more compunction about it than if he had been destroying a venomous snake. The man dived into the ground, the rifle flying from his hands, and rolled, slowly at first but with gathering impetus, over and

over in a little avalanche of stones and rocks to the bottom of the slope.

Ginger did not wait for the stones to stop rattling. Seizing Mr. Poo by the arm he pointed at the bushes behind him. "Run!" he panted. "Keep going. Hamid is in there somewhere with Captain Toxan. If you can't find them hide until help comes."

"Won't you come with us?"

"No. I shall stay here to prevent the other soldiers from following you. Don't argue. Go!"

Swaying and gasping for breath the old Chinaman went on, his servant helping him as far as he was able, for he, too, was well past his prime.

Ginger sank down on a rock behind a bush with the rifle across his knees. The whole thing was fast assuming the nature of a nightmare. Now that the vital moment had passed he became aware that his head was so splitting that he hardly knew what he was doing. His eyes were burning and his skin felt hot and dry. He had a consuming thirst and moments of dizziness.

It's the heat, he told himself. I must have got a touch of sun. The question was, would it pass or would it get worse? At all events he had got Mr. Poo, and that was enough to go on with.

Watching the top corner of the burning scrub, where he knew the rest of the enemy to be, he saw a third soldier emerge from the smoke, apparently looking for his companions. Seeing nobody he called out to those behind him. After waiting for a little while, whistling and calling, he retired, presumably to discuss the situation.

Ginger did not move. What they thought he didn't care. With his elbows on his knees he held his head in his hands in the hope of relieving the throbbing.

Time passed. How long he did not know. No more soldiers had appeared. That suited him, for by now, he thought, Mr. Poo should be with Toxan and Hamid. All seemed strangely, unnaturally quiet. The only sound was the occasional crackle of the fire as it burnt itself out. But still there was plenty of smoke, hiding what was behind it. The sun, by this time well down, glowed like a disc of molten metal, and shining directly in his eyes, hurt them. He felt desperately tired, yet questions perplexed him. Where was Biggles? According to Mata Dhinn he should be here by now. Where were the rest of the Chinese troops? What were they doing? Why didn't they show themselves?

Presently they appeared from behind the smoke, for which he was very glad, for he would rather have them where he could see them than out of sight. He had been afraid they had crossed above him without him seeing them and were now between him and Toxan. For a few minutes they stood together looking down the hill; then they began to walk down it in a manner so casual that it dawned on Ginger they were unaware what had happened to their comrades. He realized they must have heard the shots he had fired but apparently assumed they had been fired by their own people at the fugitives.

Their careless attitudes changed, however, when they came upon the body

of their comrade, the one Ginger had shot close to the burning scrub. More alert now they held a short conference over it and then went on down the slope, at the bottom of which they saw the second casualty. There was another debate, and then, to Ginger's surprise, they sat down. What were they doing? From the way they kept looking down the *nullah* it looked as if they were waiting. For what? For whom?

Ginger suddenly remembered the two natives who, it was supposed, had guided the party to Toxan's camp. He hadn't seen them. What had happened to them?

The answer came as dusk was dimming the scene.

For some minutes Ginger had been aware of a curious chirping sound, as if a number of sparrows were having an argument. In fact, without giving the matter serious thought he had believed the noise to be caused by birds. Now, with a shock, he saw he had been mistaken. The three Chinese soldiers stood up as round a shoulder of rock near them appeared two native Indians, wearing only loin-cloths, leading the way for another squad of six soldiers.

Ginger's heart sank. Three he had thought he could handle. But nine was a different matter altogether.

All was now clear. It was for this party that the original three were waiting. The two Indians had not been in evidence because they had been sent off to fetch reinforcements. The two parties met and stood talking in their lisping bird-like voices.

Suddenly Ginger shivered as if a current of cold air had blown on him. This was not from fear, or anything like it. It confirmed what already in his heart he half suspected: that the unseen peril of the jungle, fever, had struck him. His head ached unmercifully. His shirt was a wet rag. His lips were bone dry. Where was Biggles? he wondered, miserably. Why didn't he come? Another angle occurred to him. What if he did come? Knowing nothing of the hostile force in the *nullah* he would come openly, perhaps noisily, calling for Toxan. If that happened he and Bertie would walk, all unsuspectingly, into a trap from which none of them would escape.

The troops appeared to be making camp for the night having decided it was useless to search in the darkness for the man they wanted. In the circumstances there seemed to be little object in watching them and Ginger prepared to return to Toxan's hiding place; but when he attempted to get up he discovered his legs were so weak that they would not support him. The world spun round him and he had to clutch at a bush to steady himself. Dismayed by the shock of this he lay down to think things over. One fact became clear. In the state he was in it would be folly to attempt to return to Toxan. If he did not fall, and roll down into the *nullah*, perhaps hurting himself seriously, he would probably lose his way and end up lost in the jungle.

It was no use, he told himself. He would have to rest, wait for the fever, or whatever was the matter with him, to pass. The Chinese no longer worried him; he was more concerned with himself. Conscious of being terribly tired

all he wanted to do was sleep. Vaguely he wished he had chosen some other place, where the sickly smell of *mhowa* was not so pungent. It was so strong he might have been swimming in a pool of it.

Stretching himself out on the ground he closed his eyes.

CHAPTER XI

CHAPTER XI

BIGGLES ARRIVES



THE journey from the Gondi village to the Nullah Tangla, which Ram Shan had said was the name of the objective, took longer than Biggles and Bertie had been led to expect, for which reason they arrived late. There were two reasons for this. In the first place, as with “backward” natives almost everywhere, to Ram Shan time and distance were relative terms and often at fault. Or it may have been, as commonly happens—and for this Biggles should have made allowances—that in his anxiety to please he deliberately presented the most optimistic picture of a trip which he must have known would not be easy. But he was not entirely to blame. He had admitted freely that it was some time since he had visited the *nullah*, and during that period the main track he proposed following had become much overgrown. One stretch had been choked by *lantana*, a trailing scrub through which knives had to be used to force a passage. This was slow and grilling work, yet Ram Shan dared not leave the track for fear of losing his bearings.

As a result of this, Biggles’ party, which comprised himself and Bertie, Ram Shan, Bira Shah, to whom Bertie had of course returned the Lee-Enfield, and two Gonds who had volunteered to carry food and water, found itself benighted while still some little way from the objective. However, Biggles insisted on pressing on, and after several disappointments, Ram Shan having said many times “only a little way now, sahib,” the party, hot and tired, finally found itself in the open, with the *nullah* at its feet. It was dark, but the moon was up, nearly full, and the sky glittering with stars. Moonlight had not helped them under the forest trees, but now it was a blessing, for from the top, looking down into the ravine, in the pale blue light it appeared to be a grim and forbidding place; as in fact it was, even in daylight. In pitch darkness a descent to the bottom would have been a hazardous, if not perilous, undertaking.

“This is the Nullah Tangla, sahib,” said Ram Shan, as they stood on the brink looking into the abyss.

“How did you get down?” asked Biggles.

“This way, sahib. I show you.”

Ram Shan pushed on a short distance to where a landslide had made a steep but not impossible slope. Before beginning the descent he held up his head and sniffed “I smell camp fire,” he announced. “Toxan sahib still here.” He was not to know, of course, that the smoke he could smell had nothing to do with the lone prospector; it was coming from the smouldering embers of the burnt scrub some way farther along the gorge.

“Good,” said Biggles to Bertie. “He’s still here.”

Up to this point he had no idea whether Toxan was still there or had left. Naturally, the thought did not enter his head that Ginger might be there.

They went down, Ram Shan picking the easiest way. On reaching the bottom Ram Shan said again: “This way, sahib. Unless he has moved it I will show you his tent, where I saw it.” He started off, the others following in single file.

“How about giving him a hail?” suggested Bertie.

“I don’t think that would be wise,” answered Biggles. “At this time of night, if he happens to be asleep it might give him a fright. Let’s see first where he is.”

In a matter of moments he was to be thankful he had taken this decision.

Ram Shan, his eyes ahead, stumbled over something on the ground.

Biggles heard him catch his breath sharply. “What is it,” he asked quickly.

“There is death here, sahib,” said Ram Shan, softly.

They stood looking down at the body.

“Do you know this man?” inquired Biggles.

“Yes, sahib. He is a Gurkha, one who stayed with Toxan sahib. I saw him when I was here. There has been trouble.”

“I can see that,” returned Biggles, with gentle sarcasm, “Let us go on. If one is dead the others may be dead, too.”

They went on, slowly, Ram Shan looking about him nervously, and they had not gone far when they came upon the body of the Chinese soldier. These, of course, were the bodies Ginger had seen.

“So that’s it,” muttered Biggles, grimly. “I can see what’s happened here. We’re too late. The Chinese troops we were told about have got here first.”

Advancing under Ram Shan’s guidance they reached the burnt-out remains of Toxan’s camp.

“The devils who did this must still be around, old boy,” said Bertie. “I can still smell smoke. Who else would make it?”

“If Toxan has been killed one would have expected his body to be here,” said Biggles in a puzzled voice. “I don’t understand this smell of smoke.” He touched the embers at his feet. “It isn’t coming from here. This stuff is stone cold. It must have been out for hours.”

“The Chinese, if they were responsible, may still be about. Have they lit a fire somewhere near?”

“Could be. But if they’ve got Mr. Poo, and that’s what it looks like, one would have expected them to head back for Thibet flat out. There could be no other reason for them being here except to capture Mr. Poo.”

Biggles spun round as if he had been stung when a voice in the darkness said: “Don’t shoot, sahib.”

“Who’s that.”

“I come.” Hamid Khan, *kukri* in hand, the plaster Ginger had put on his head shining whitely in the moonlight, stepped from the bushes into the open and saluted.

“Who are you?” asked Biggles, sharply.

Ram Shan answered the question. “This man is a Gurkha of Toxan sahib. I remember seeing him here.”

“Is Captain Toxan alive?” Biggles asked the Ghurkha.

“Yes, sahib. He is wounded.”

“Where is he?”

“I show. Make no noise. Enemies are near,” warned Hamid. “Your friend tells me to tell you he is here.”

“Friend. What friend? Do you mean Toxan?”

“No, sahib. Young man. He tells us you are coming.”

Biggles looked at Bertie. “What the deuce is he talking about?”

“Can he mean Algy or Ginger? No one else knew we were on our way here.”

“But that’s impossible.” Biggles looked back at Hamid. “How did this man get here?”

“He is your friend of the red hair. He falls from above.”

“By thunder! Then it *must* be Ginger,” Biggles told Bertie in a voice stiff with amazement. “He must be out of his mind.” To the Gurkha he said: “Lead on.”

“Quietly, sahib. The Chinese are still here.”

Hamid Khan made his way up the sloping side of the ravine into the deep brush in which Toxan lay with his bandaged shoulder. He was conscious, and smiled weakly. “Thanks for coming,” were his first words.

Biggles was looking around. “I understand a friend of mine is here.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you know?”

“After he had put this bandage on me he went off, taking my rifle, with the intention of trying to find Mr. Poo Ling, the Chinese gentleman I had staying here with me.”

Biggles looked at Bertie and shook his head helplessly. “Mad,” he said. “He must be completely off his rocker.” He turned back to the wounded man.

“Before we go any further, tell me, how badly are you hurt?”

“According to your young friend not too badly. The bullet went right through. He told me to be still to give the blood a chance to dry and the wound to heal.”

“Quite right. All we can do for the moment is wait for him to come back. Meanwhile you might tell me what happened here.”

Toxan told of how he had been attacked, and seeing that he was outnumbered had ordered Mr. Poo to hide in the jungle. Hamid had seen him and his Thibetan servant run into the scrub. Unfortunately the Chinese troops had also seen them and had set fire to the place to smoke them out. As far as he knew they were still inside when Ginger had arrived on the scene. He had gone off to see if he could do anything about it.

“What did he think he, single-handed, could do against a party of armed men?” asked Biggles, bitterly. “How many of these Chinese are there?”

“Five, now, as far as I know. I saw six, and shot one.”

“Did Ginger know how many there were of them?”

“Yes. We told him.”

“Then what in heaven’s name did he hope to do?”

“I don’t think he knew himself, except that he had some vague idea of getting hold of Mr. Poo. He just borrowed my rifle and went. Hamid would have gone with him but he said it was better he should stay here to watch for you to arrive, and put you wise as to what has happened.”

“And these Chinese are still in the *nullah*?”

“Yes. A bit farther down, by the scrub they burnt. I had better tell you we heard shooting just before sundown. Two shots sounded like my Rigby.”

Biggles drew a deep breath. “I don’t like the sound of that. If Ginger’s been in action, and hasn’t come back, the enemy may have got him; or worse still, he might be lying out there somewhere, wounded. We shall have to do something about this right away.”

“He may have got hold of Mr. Poo and is lying low with him,” suggested Bertie.

Biggles shook his head dubiously. “Possibly, but I doubt it. Had he got hold of Mr. Poo he would have brought him back here, or at any rate, sent him back. The fact that he hasn’t returned can only mean that for one reason or another he couldn’t get here.”

“Finding him in the dark isn’t going to be easy, old boy.”

“Of course it won’t be easy but the least we can do is try.”

“Absolutely. I couldn’t agree more.”

“What knocks me flat is why he took the risk of jumping in here.”

“I can answer that,” put in Toxan. “The fighting was over when he arrived but there was still plenty of smoke. He said he saw the smoke, and flying lower spotted two bodies. He came to investigate.”

“So that was it,” murmured Biggles. “It doesn’t matter. What we have to do now is find him.”

Hamid stepped in. He suggested, respectfully, that now there was no longer any need for him to remain with Toxan it might be a good thing if he went out scouting alone. Having lived in the *nullah* he knew every inch of the ground. One would make less noise than three. He would first find out if the Chinese were there, how many there were of them and what they were doing.

To this sensible proposal Biggles agreed. "Don't be too long or we may have to start looking for you," he said.

Hamid, as silent as a stalking cat, moved off.

Biggles sent Ram Shan to fetch some water and then sat down beside Toxan who gave him more details of the raid.

An anxious half-hour passed before Hamid returned.

"Well?" asked Biggles.

"I have found him."

"Wonderful. Why didn't he come back with you?"

"He sleeps, lying on the ground with the rifle beside him."

"*Sleeps!* Why didn't you wake him?"

"He will not wake."

"Why not? Are you sure he isn't wounded?"

"I find no wound. I think it is the fever that strikes him."

Biggles sprang to his feet. "Take us to him."

"Care must be taken, sahib. The Chinese make camp close by."

"Did you get an idea of how many there are of them?"

"They sleep on the sand. I count nine. One sits."

Biggles stared. "*Nine!*" He looked at Toxan. "I thought you reckoned there were not more than half a dozen."

"Others must have joined them."

"Six or nine, who cares?" put in Bertie, briskly. "Let's get cracking."

Biggles slung his water bottle over his shoulder and picking up his rifle made a signal to Hamid to lead the way.

Creeping through bush, crawling over open ground, taking care not to displace stones, Biggles and Bertie followed their guide along the sloping bank of the *nullah*. Once Hamid halted to point out the red spark of a camp fire well below on the dry watercourse. "Chinese," he whispered. He went on, and after a few minutes came to the rock behind which Ginger was lying, restless and murmuring incoherently.

Biggles knelt beside him, took his pulse and laid a hand on his flushed forehead. "It's fever all right," he said. "You watch the enemy."

He unscrewed the cap of the water bottle and into it he poured some water. From a phial he took from his pocket he shook out a tablet. Crushing it to powder with the brass end of a cartridge he mixed it with the water and a sip at a time managed to get the liquid between Ginger's lips. "He's running a high temperature but I don't think he's too bad," he told Bertie. "As it's his first bout he should soon get over it. It's when you get attack after attack, each one getting worse, that it knocks you out. That's what happened to me."

“What have you given him?”

“A dose of Atebrin.¹ That should do the trick. I blame myself for this. I should have put you all on it, daily, from the moment we arrived; but I didn’t think we’d be here long enough to matter. Frankly, in bringing a bottle of tablets I was thinking of myself, having been through it and knowing how susceptible I’d be to a recurrence.”

“How long before he’ll be able to walk?”

“He won’t do any walking tonight. He’ll recover faster asleep.”

“Be a bit awkward staying here, won’t it, with those Chinese johnnies below?”

“I’ve no intention of staying here. We shall have to carry him to Toxan’s hideout.” Biggles looked up at Hamid. “Go and fetch the bearers we brought with us. Ram Shan and the other three Gonds.”

Hamid saluted and vanished into the shadows.

Biggles sat down by Ginger’s side.

“In a way I’m glad to see those Chinese there,” said Biggles.

“Why?”

“Because it suggests to me that Mr. Poo must still be somewhere about otherwise they’d have started for home.”

“True enough.”

“If they haven’t got him they’ll start hunting for him as soon as it gets daylight. That won’t be so good.”

“They might find us.”

“That’s what I mean. With two sick men on our hands we shan’t be able to move far, or fast. But we’ll deal with that situation when the time comes.”

Hamid returned with Ram Shan, Bira Shah and the two Gonds. Forming on either side of Ginger, who was still unconscious, they picked him up and under Hamid’s guidance returned to Toxan, Bertie carrying the rifle. Having made him as comfortable as circumstances permitted, Biggles sat down and helped himself to a swig of water. He also took an Atebrin tablet.

“By gosh! I’m tired,” he said wearily. “Too much walking never did agree with me.”

“What do you think has become of Mr. Poo?” asked Toxan.

“I haven’t a clue. We may know presently. When Ginger comes round he should be able to tell us.”

Biggles lay back. Hamid stood like a bronze statue looking down into the nullah. The Gonds squatted cross-legged on the ground, silent, motionless.

Ginger’s fitful movements stopped as the medicine Biggles had given him took effect. The uneasy murmuring died on his lips and his breathing became more regular.

“That’s better,” said Biggles.

¹ Atebrin: proprietary (brand) name for mepacrine, which is also known as quinacrine, which is an antimalarial.

CHAPTER XII



CHAPTER XII

WHAT NEXT?

STRANGELY enough, excluding the Indians, the first of the party to awake in the morning was Ginger. He was lying on his back, and as the blinds of unconsciousness were slowly drawn his eyes gazed uncomprehendingly at patches of grey sky through the bushes that mingled their leaves and branches overhead. For a little while the picture conveyed nothing to him. Then his eyelids flickered and he remembered where he was. Recollection rushed in, and with a start he sat up, reaching for his rifle.

His groping hand touched something soft, and looking down he saw Biggles lying there. On the other side lay Bertie. He saw Toxan and the Gonds and recognized the place. How did he get there? He thought hard, but there seemed to be a gap in his memory which he could not bridge. He was relieved to find his headache had gone.

Biggles must have heard or felt him move, for his eyes opened, and in a flash, he, too, was sitting up. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Not too bad. What happened? How did I get here?"

"You went down with a touch of fever."

"That's right. I remember now."

"We found you and carried you in."

"So you turned up after all. We had your note so I knew you'd started."

"It took a bit longer to get here than we expected and it was dark when we arrived. What on earth possessed you to drop into a place like this?"

"Bringing Mata Dhinn with us to point out the place we flew over, and seeing a lot of smoke, shot the *nullah* to try to make out what was going on. We spotted a couple of bodies so I stepped out to find out who they were. For all I knew it might have been you, having arrived early."

The sound of voices had awakened the others. They, too, sat up. Ginger looked at them in turn. Someone he expected to see was not there.

"Where's Mr. Poo?" he inquired.

"That's what we're waiting for you to tell us."

"Do you mean you haven't seen him?"

"Not a sign."

"What a pity."

"Did you see him?"

"Yes. I headed him in this direction feeling sure he'd find this hideout, or run into Hamid, who would bring him here."

"Did you speak to him."

"A few words, telling him to beat it, pointing out the way. I hadn't time to say much."

"Do you think the Chinese got him?"

"I don't think so. They didn't even look for him up to the time I passed out. The last I saw of them some reinforcements had come along and they were making camp. That was about sundown, and I reckoned they wouldn't waste time looking for him in the dark."

"Toxan tells me he heard shooting. What was that about?"

"It was me. I had to shoot a couple of 'em. There was no alternative. They were on Mr. Poo's heels and would have got him if I hadn't stepped in."

"You'd better tell me exactly what happened, then I shall know better how we stand."

Biggles gave Ginger another tablet, had one himself and made Bertie take one. "How about you?" he questioned, looking at Toxan, who seemed comfortable.

"Don't worry about me. Keep 'em for yourself. I'm one of those lucky people. Never had malaria in my life. For some reason the mosquitoes don't like the taste of me. If they did I wouldn't be here now. I'd have been dead long ago."

"Fair enough. Go ahead, Ginger."

Ginger told his story. It didn't take long. "Lucky for me you found me," he concluded. "I couldn't make out what had come over me. I felt awful."

"Hamid found you," Biggles told him. He tinned to Bertie. "It looks as if Mr. Poo and his pal are somewhere in the jungle. They must have blundered into it, and in their hurry to get away lost their sense of direction. Our next job will be to try to find them, otherwise they'll perish. They won't be able to live where they are and they'll never make the long trip to low ground where they might get help."

"The Chinese troops will be looking for 'em, too, old boy," reminded Bertie, seriously, breathing on his monocle and polishing it.

"So I suppose. Well, we can't prevent that. We shall have to try to keep out of their way, that's all about it. Hamid, now it's daylight, I wonder if you'd do a bit of scouting, find out where they are and what they're doing?"

The Gurkha saluted and departed.

He was away for twenty minutes or so, those in the hideout occupying the time by exchanging further details about the affair. Ginger told of the visit of

the six Chinese to the lake and what had happened there.

When Hamid returned it was to report that the troops were filing up the *nullah* in a long line, as if to take up positions to start the search for the man they wanted.

"I'll tell you something," said Ginger. "Last night they saw the bodies of the two men I shot. I saw them stop and look at them. So as they'd hardly expect Mr. Poo to be responsible for that they must know someone else is around with a rifle."

"They can't know we're here so they'll imagine it was Toxan who did the shooting," answered Biggles.

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," put in Toxan. "They must have seen me fall. I was running with Hamid at the time. He helped me up and managed to get me along into the jungle. After that they didn't bother about me. They went off after Mr. Poo."

"According to Ginger they know we have a camp at the lake," said Bertie. "They may associate us with what has happened here. They saw the machine, and they must have heard it fly over, if they didn't actually see it."

"That's true," agreed Biggles, pensively.

"So what's the next move?" asked Ginger.

"I don't know about moving," returned Biggles. "With sick and wounded on our hands we shan't be able to move far, if at all."

"I'll be all right," declared Ginger.

"Don't fool yourself. You may think so lying there, but when you get up you won't feel so good. You'll be weak on your pins for two or three days. Whatever some of us do someone will have to stay here on guard until we're all able to march to the lake." Biggles looked up. "By the way, what did you do with the parachute?"

"I rolled everything into a ball and stuffed it under a bush."

"If the Chinese find that it'll give 'em ideas," said Biggles, meaningly. "Still, we can't do anything about that now. It's a pretty kettle of fish. Even if we sit still and do nothing there's a chance the troops may barge into us when they start combing the *nullah* for Mr. Poo. That would be awkward. If we could get hold of Mr. Poo we might manage to get out of the *nullah* into the forest on top. The only suggestion I can make is for Hamid to watch the enemy while I have a prowling round with Ram Shan, who has been here before, to see if we can pick up the track of Mr. Poo and his Thibetan friend. The rest stay here."

Bertie said frankly he didn't think much of being left out, but agreed. So did Ram Shan, who, with native shrewdness, pointed out that, knowing someone was about with a rifle, the enemy would be nervous, and for that reason would not be able to move about as freely as they would wish.

Said Biggles to Hamid. "You go off to watch them, and hurry back to tell us if they look like coming in this direction."

Again the Gurkha vanished in the surrounding scrub.

A few minutes later, from a distance, came a sound that needed no explanation. It was the drone of an aircraft.

"That'll be Algy, coming to have a dekko at what I'm doing," observed Ginger. "When he doesn't see me he'll be worried sick."

"That should give these Chinese thugs food for thought," returned Biggles. "They'll know an aircraft isn't likely to be here on a mere joy-ride. They'll also guess it's the machine they saw at the lake."

"They'll work it out we're looking for Toxan," surmised Bertie. "I don't see how they could possibly associate us with Mr. Poo."

"I hope you're right."

The machine had now appeared and came roaring down the *nullah*, filling the air with sound, at below their own height. There was not a chance, of course, that Algy would be able to see them, and with the troops near there could be no question of making a signal.

Said Ginger: "He must be in a rare flap wondering why I don't stand in the open to show myself. Or you, for that matter. He'll assume you've got here by now."

"I'm afraid he'll have to go on wondering," answered Biggles. "If he spots our Chinese friends he'll soon guess why we're sitting tight and not making a smoke signal."

Twice the machine raced the full length of the *nullah*, flying dangerously low; then it zoomed high and the drone receded.

"He's gone," said Biggles. "He'll probably come back later for another look."

A bear went past, grumbling to itself. Bertie reached quickly for a rifle, but it went on, taking no notice of them.

"Somebody must have disturbed him," said Toxan. "There are quite a few of them here. They've got to know me, and as I've never interfered with them I've never had any trouble. There's a group of mulberry trees near my old camp; they were always there, poking about and climbing the trees when the fruit's ripe. By the way, talking of my camp there's one thing I might as well tell you in case anything happens to me. It was really very bad luck for me, these Chinese crashing in just as I'd found what I'd been looking for for years."

"You mean—rubies?"

"Yes. I've some magnificent stones, a coffee tin full. I buried them just under the sand on which my tent was pitched. They should still be there. You might remember it."

"I will," confirmed Biggles. "By the way, what about the jade Mr. Poo brought out with him?"

"He had to leave most of it behind. The bulk of his treasure was left in China, in a safe place. The new Chinese government knows that, but doesn't know where it is. That's why they're prepared to go to all this trouble to get hold of him. Poo had some pieces of rare jade with him, in a sack, when he

left Thibet, but as it was taking him all his time to get along he had to abandon the lot. He didn't tell me exactly where or I'd have sent my fellows to fetch it. All he could say was he'd left it under a heap of pine needles in a spruce forest on the ten thousand feet mark."

This conversation was cut off by the return of Hamid. He reported that the Chinese had gone to the far end of the *nullah*. There they had made a line from the top to the bottom and were beating the scrub, coming this way.

"That's what I thought they'd do," said Biggles.

"To cover the whole side of the *nullah* they must be fairly wide apart?"

Hamid agreed that this was so.

"In which case the blighters might go past us without seeing us," suggested Bertie, optimistically.

"I wouldn't reckon on that," said Biggles. "I'm only glad they didn't play their last trick of starting a fire to smoke us out."

"They couldn't," put in Toxan. "Otherwise they would probably have done that. The stuff along here is too green to burn. The piece they did burn was on dry ground, in full sun, and consisted mostly of parched bamboo with a lot of dry grass in it. That's why it was easy to set fire to it."

"If the enemy is beating this way, if Mr. Poo is still on this side of the gorge he'll have to retreat in front of 'em," stated Ginger, who was obviously fast recovering from his sharp attack of fever. "If so we may see him."

"I don't think we can stay here," said Biggles.

"With three rifles, if we include Bira Shah's musket, we should be able to make things deuced uncomfortable for the stinkers—if you see what I mean," contended Bertie.

"Maybe. But I'd rather avoid direct hostilities if it's possible. The odds are against us, so even if we got away with it we could hardly hope to escape without casualties. Our only way of getting out of the country is via the lake, and that's a fair step from here. This is a case of he who runs away lives to fight another day."

"Then what do you suggest we do about it, old boy? I hear sounds that suggest to me we shall soon have to be doing something."

This was evident to everyone. The Chinese were calling to each other; stones were rolling down the bank and bushes were being trampled. These noises were steadily drawing nearer, and the Gonds were looking towards them anxiously. Only the Gurkha, standing with his *kukri* in his hand, seemed unconcerned.

"We might try getting above the line," decided Biggles. "Toxan will have to be carried, of course, but the four Gonds should be able to do it. Ginger, with help, may be able to manage on his feet."

From the advancing line came a shot, a shout, and a laugh. A bear went crashing past.

"If those fools are shooting at bears for the fun of it, before they're finished they may wish they'd left them alone," growled Toxan.

“Let’s go—or try it,” said Biggles. “I don’t know how long these devils are likely to stay here, but I must remind you that we’re practically out of water and we haven’t enough food to give eight people a meal. But we’ll deal with that problem presently. Let’s see if we can get over the rim of the *nullah*.”

The intention was explained to the natives, who understood perfectly. There was no question of making a stretcher. The four Gonds clasped hands under Toxan, and lifting him bodily started a slow ascent up the hill. Ginger started without help, but soon discovering what Biggles had told him was true, was glad to accept the arm of Hamid. Biggles, with his rifle, led the way. Bertie, with Toxan’s rifle, brought up the rear.

Slowly and painfully, with frequent halts, pushing through bush and bamboo, working round outcrops of rock and loose boulders, progress was made up the steep slope. At one place Hamid had to slice a way with his everhandy *kukri* through a tangle of *lantana*. All the time the noise of the enemy advance drew nearer.

They were nearing the objective, the true jungle that began at the top of the rise, when there came a series of whoops, yells and cries, as if hounds had sprung a hare. Bushes crashed. Out of them, at the side of Biggles’ party, now somewhat strung out, close to Ginger, burst a Chinese soldier. He seemed astonished by what he saw and lost a few seconds bringing his rifle to his shoulder. That cost him his life. Hamid dropped Ginger as if he had been a *krait* and leapt forward. His *kukri* swished, and the Chinese went down without a sound. For a moment Ginger felt physically sick, but he realized the Gurkha had saved his life.

“Keep going,” ordered Biggles, tersely.

A few more yards and again came the shouts. They ended in a babble of voices.

Biggles stopped. “It sounds to me,” he said slowly, “as if they’ve got Mr. Poo.”

A shot rang out.

“And I’d say they’ve shot the Thibetan,” added Biggles. “If I’m right they may not come any farther. We’re nearly at the top so we might as well finish the job in case they do.”

Panting and streaming with perspiration they struggled on the last few yards, and topping the lip of the *nullah* sank down exhausted. Just inside the forest Hamid with his *kukri* cleared a little space under a tree that bore scarlet blossoms dripping with a sort of gum. They all moved into the place thus made and sat down.

“Now what do we do?” asked Bertie.

“The first thing will be to find out if they’ve got Mr. Poo,” answered Biggles.

“And if they have?”

“We shall have to try to get him back. After all this sweat I’m not going home without him if I can help it.”

“Too true. I’m with you there, old boy. Absolutely. Every time.”

“I go see Chinese,” offered Hamid. “Rest here.” He went off.

“Stout fella, Hamid,” said Bertie, approvingly.

“Worth his weight in gold,” declared Toxan. “I don’t know where I’d have been without him.”

They waited. Biggles lit a cigarette. Ginger, feeling as weak as a kitten after the climb, lay back.

CHAPTER XIII



CHAPTER XIII

A WAITING GAME

"If they've got Mr. Poo I don't see what we can do about it," said Ginger, moodily, after a time.

"We haven't finished yet," answered Biggles curtly. "What I'm worried about is food. I try to plan for emergencies but I couldn't foresee a situation like this. When we leave here, whichever way we go we shall have a long march in front of us, and with Toxan unable to walk, and you not entirely fit, it's bound to be a slow one."

Although Biggles spoke quietly Toxan overheard the remark. "Don't worry about me," he said.

Biggles ignored the remark. "It seems likely the Chinese are short of food, too," he went on. "Ginger, you've seen this hole in the ground from topsides; how far do you reckon we are from the lake? It's nearer than the Gond village, and there isn't much there in the way of food, anyway. At the lake we have food and transport."

"I don't know about the ups and downs, but I'd say, as a crow flies when it's sober, between twelve and fifteen miles. That's as near as I can judge. Has it occurred to you that if the Chinese are as short of grub as you seem to think, they may make for the lake? They know about us being there and they'll realize we couldn't be there without a stock of food."

Biggles thought for a moment then looked at Bira Shah. "Could you find your way to the lake from here?"

The Gond said he could. Many game tracks led directly to the lake, where

animals went to drink.

“How long would it take you to get there?”

Bira Shah said he might get there by that night or early in the morning.

“We have no food. There is plenty there. Would you be willing to go and take a message to the sahib there? He would give you food to bring back to us. You can take one of your friends with you. Mata Dhinn is at the lake, too. He could come back with you, helping to carry the load.”

“Where we find you, sahib, when we come back?”

“Here. If we have to move someone will stay to tell you where we are.”

Bira Shah said he understood.

“I’ll write a note for you to take.”

“Yes, sahib.”

“Come back as quickly as you can.”

Bertie stepped in. “But look here, old boy. It’d be quicker if Algy flew over and dropped us a parcel of grub.”

“With the Chinese in the offing? We don’t want to feed them. Algy couldn’t drop anything without them seeing it. He wouldn’t know exactly where we were, anyway.”

“We could make a signal.”

“Which the Chinese would also see. Forget it. The only way is for someone to go on foot.”

Bertie shook his head sadly. “Funny how none of my schemes ever seem to click.”

“One will, one day,” promised Biggles, cheerfully.

There was silence while he wrote the note and handed it to Bira Shah, who elected to take Ram Shan with him.

Within a minute the two of them had moved off, Bira Shah carrying his old Lee-Enfield rifle. Ram Shan had only a knife. Biggles’ last words had been to warn them to keep well away from the Chinese until they were clear of the *nullah*. The troops were still about and their position could be judged by the noise they made. There was a good deal of calling, and shouting.

“Why all the din?” queried Ginger.

“Not speaking the language I don’t know, but if you asked me to guess I’d say they’re calling the man Hamid killed,” returned Biggles.

This conversation, and the arrangements, had been made while the party was awaiting the return of Hamid. There was nothing else to do.

After a little while the Gurkha came back. He reported that, as was expected, the enemy had got Mr. Poo, who, of course, as they had been in Toxan’s camp together, he knew well by sight. He hadn’t seen the Thibetan.

“What are they doing?” asked Biggles.

“Some stand bottom of *nullah*, top end, with Poo. Some look in bushes.”

“What are they looking for?”

Hamid showed his teeth in a grin and touched his *kukri*. “Man I kill, sahib.”

“Naturally, they’ll wonder what has become of him; that’s why they’re waiting, I suppose,” Biggles told the others.

“If they find him it should give their nerves a bit of a jolt,” said Ginger, with savage satisfaction.

Hamid raised a hand at Biggles, apparently accepting him as the leader of the party. “Come, sahib. I show something.”

“Show what?”

“Something. Not far. Chinese not near.”

Biggles got up. “I fancy Hamid has an idea. I’d better see what it is. Stay where you are or I may have a job to find you.” He followed the Ghurkha over the brink of the ravine and down the slope, for part of the way following the route by which they had gone up. Then, traversing, they presently arrived almost at the spot where Ginger had been found, the place from which he had seen Mr. Poo and his companion make their break from the burning scrub. The fire was now out, leaving an area of blackened earth dotted with holes that looked as if they might be caves, the lairs of the bears that frequented the place.

But this was not what Hamid had brought him to see. Below on the floor of the ravine where the Chinese had camped, was a pile of equipment, packs, haversacks, and the like. There was no one on guard.

“We take kit,” suggested Hamid who, having been a soldier, knew what this would mean. “Take kit they must stay,” went on the Gurkha. “Trouble for them if go without it. While they wait we catch Mr. Poo.”

Biggles saw the possibilities at once. The loss of their entire kit would keep the Chinese there, for some time, anyway, while they searched for it. They wouldn’t want to start their long march home without food, or full water bottles. While they waited there might be a chance of recovering the prisoner.

Biggles stood up and advanced to a point from which it was possible to get a view up the *nullah*. There were no troops in sight, a bend, actually a rocky bluff, coming between them. They were still calling to each other and shouting for their missing comrade. The voices were at a fair distance. Hamid had seen the men at the top end of the gorge, so presumably they were still there.

Biggles decided the chance was worth taking, for he could not entertain the thought of losing the man he had come to find; at least, without making an effort to save him.

“Come,” he said, and ran on down the slope.

Reaching the heap of equipment, the usual military assortment which included sundry stores such as a box of cartridges and Red Cross kit, the question arose where to hide it. The caves in the side of the *nullah* seemed ready-made for the job. Biggles told Hamid so. “You take the stuff while I keep watch in case the enemy comes,” he said. “Be quick.”

Hamid went to work, and the pile shrank in size, for it was only a short distance between the camp and the caves. Biggles squatted behind a boulder

and kept watch.

There was a diversion, although it did not affect him, when Algy, in the aircraft, came roaring through the gorge. Biggles could sympathize with him, realizing he must be wondering what was going on in the *nullah*.

He made no signal, thinking that if he did it might distract the attention of Algy who, in his eagerness to see more, could easily collide with the wall of the *nullah*, a possibility which, in any case, caused Biggles some anxiety. If Algy spotted him he might come even lower, perhaps circle, to see what he was doing. Again, such a manoeuvre might bring the troops along to ascertain the cause. Algy, reflected Biggles, would almost certainly see the Chinese troops and imagine the worst had happened. Still, nothing could be done about it.

By the time the plane pulled out and headed for the lake Hamid had finished his task. They did not linger, for the voices were coming nearer, the troops evidently rallying on their camp. Scrambling up the slope until they found a suitable piece of cover, with plenty of rough bush behind them in which to retire should it become necessary, they sat down to watch events.

Presently the troops appeared, or five of them, walking slowly, almost sauntering, with Mr. Poo between them, the others apparently hanging back still looking for the missing man. Evidently he had not been found. The Thibetan was not there. Mr. Poo seemed bowed with grief, or age, or fatigue, and Biggles' sympathy went out to him. At the same time his anger against his captors mounted.

The moment when the men missed their kit was clear. From walking casually, with frequent glances behind them for those who were dallying, they hurried forward and finished at a run, to then look about them in surprise or consternation. One of them, from the cyphers on his arm, was the officer or N.C.O. in charge of the party.

They went into a huddle, talking volubly. From their actions it was possible to guess what they were saying, almost what they were thinking. Breaking up they wandered about, studying the ground as if they were not convinced they were in the right place. Some began looking behind rocks and bushes, presumably for the missing equipment. Mr. Poo had sunk down and sat, a picture of dejection, with his head in his hands.

With the soldiers offering such an easy target, for a minute Biggles was tempted to shoot; but his common sense told him such an action would be unwise. It would only expose his position, and if he succeeded in killing one or two it would only make the task of getting hold of Mr. Poo more difficult. The search for the missing kit went on. Time passed. There was a commotion when a soldier, hunting in some bamboo, flushed a bear, probably one of those that had been smoked out from its den. Two or three shots were fired at it, for what purpose was not evident since the beast only tried to run away, but as far as Biggles could see they had no effect. By a curious chance the animal bolted into the very cave in which Hamid had flung the enemy's kit. It

happened to be one of the nearest. Biggles thought the troops would think twice about entering a cave with an angry bear inside, so all they had done was make their chances of finding what they were looking for even more difficult.

The day wore on. One by one the soldiers who had been looking for the missing man drifted in. The party showed no signs of departing so it began to look, as Hamid had anticipated, as if they were not going to start for home that day.

Biggles looked at his watch. He said to Hamid: "I think you had better go and tell the others what has happened. They'll be getting worried by us being away for so long, and may come to look for us. I won't move from here. Say we may be here for some time longer yet. Tell them I suggest they might move a little deeper into the jungle. The farther they are from the nullah the safer they'll be."

"Yes, sahib." Hamid smiled slyly. "If Chinese men stay here all night I get Mr. Poo. I get him when dark."

"We'll see about it," agreed Biggles. "Take the message."

"Yes, sahib."

The Gurkha wormed his way into the scrub behind them and disappeared.

Biggles continued to watch what was going on below, although actually this was not much. The troops seemed completely nonplussed by the disappearance of their equipment, and stood about, sometimes gazing apprehensively at the patches of jungle which here and there had found a foothold on the sloping banks. Mr. Poo never moved. He sat with his head in his hands, staring at the ground in front of him. Biggles found it easy to imagine what he was thinking.

There was a sudden stir, which brought Biggles to the alert—for he was getting drowsy in the hot sun—when somewhere out of sight a rifle shot echoed. The cause was revealed when a few minutes later a soldier appeared dragging a dead bear cub which obviously he had shot. His arrival in camp was greeted with cries of approval, and very soon, a fire having been lighted, the bear was being skinned and jointed for food. This confirmed Biggles' opinion that the enemy was hungry. The small beast was something for them to go on with, he meditated. But one small bear between eight men would not last long.

The sinking sun now appeared to be balanced on the distant tree tops. Like a great crimson balloon it flooded the *nullah* with a glow that made the rocks and bare patches of earth appear red hot. Having been soaked with sunshine all day, that, to Biggles, was nearly how they felt.

CHAPTER XIV

CHAPTER XIV

HAMID KHAN SHOWS HOW



THE crimson glow had faded to purple and dusk was filling the *nullah* with shadows when a slight sound behind him brought Biggles' head round with a start.

It was Hamid. With him was Bertie, Toxan's rifle in his hand.

As they crawled to a squatting position beside him Biggles frowned. "What are you doing here?" he growled at Bertie. "I left you in charge up top."

"I heard a shot, and thought maybe you were having a spot of bother. So I toddled along to lend a hand if necessary—if you get my meaning. Ginger's taken over. He's pretty well okay now."

"Hamid has told you the position?"

"Yes. Shouldn't we be able to do something about this?"

"If they look like moving off we shall have to, but it seems more as if they intend to stay the night here. That would suit us better."

"What are they doing?"

"At the moment having supper off a bear cub. They're out of food."

"Why haven't they gone?"

"How would I know? They might be waiting for their missing man to come in. If he doesn't show up they may make a thorough search for him in the morning. It's too dark for them to do anything about that tonight. They may still hope to find their missing equipment. Hamid told you what we did with it?"

"He did. Jolly good show."

"It may be, now they've got Mr. Poo, they're in no desperate hurry to get back. Or it could be having no food or water is the answer. Perhaps they hope to get some from somewhere."

"There's water by Toxan's old camp."

"They've nothing to carry it in. The fools left their water bottles there and we dumped 'em in the cave with the rest of the stuff. Poor old Poo seems to be

in poor shape. I doubt if he'll be able to walk far. Remember, they've a long way to go, uphill all the way."

"Well, what's the drill, old boy."

"I fancy Hamid has an idea for getting hold of Poo when it gets really dark. We can't move from here, anyway, until the people who have gone to the lake come back with something to eat. It'd be asking for trouble to start without food, particularly as it looks as if we shall have to carry Toxan. We can't leave him here, even with Hamid to look after him. He ought to be in hospital. In the jungle wounds easily turn septic. If we could get him to the lake I'd fly him to Delhi, where he'd be all right—doctors, and so on."

"We've fixed up a stretcher."

"How? What with?"

"I went down to the bottom of the *nullah* with Ginger and we recovered his brolly. Back up top we cut a couple of saplings and lashed some of the parachute fabric between them, using the shrouds for tying."

"That was a brainy idea. Who thought of it?"

Bertie smiled. "Believe it or not, I did."

"Top marks. I told you your turn would come."

"I had to think of something to do, old boy. It was no joke, just sitting stewing in our own juice."

Biggles nodded towards the enemy camp—not that there was literally a camp. "They obviously intend to spend the night where they are. That suits us. They won't—in fact, they couldn't—do anything in the dark."

"What happened to the two wild Indians who Toxan thought brought them here? The two Ginger saw. Are they still with them?"

"I haven't seen them. I've no idea of what became of them. I'd better ask Hamid if he has a plan for getting hold of Mr. Poo. You can just see the old man, sitting near the fire."

"Is he tied up?"

"I don't think so. There would be no need for that. If he bolted he wouldn't get a mile. When I saw him on his feet he could just about totter, that's all." Biggles beckoned to Hamid, who was squatting a little apart, to come nearer. "How can we get Mr. Poo?" he asked.

"Wait for dark, sahib. Chinese men sleep. I go," whispered the Ghurkha.

Biggles looked at Bertie and shrugged. "He's probably right," he said softly.

Little more was said. Night, deep and as yet moonless, filled the *nullah* with a darkness almost tangible. The sounds from the enemy camp, less than a hundred yards away, and below, died away, and a solemn hush, broken occasionally by the cry of a nocturnal creature, fell. Once, after a coughing grunt, that seemed to come from the far side of the *nullah*, Biggles breathed: "Panther."

"What if he comes this way?"

"He won't come near us. He probably winded the Chinese and grunted

because he didn't like the smell of 'em."

An hour passed, a long hour heavy with silence and the almost overpowering scent of night-flowering trees and shrubs. Then a spreading silvery glow in the sky foretold the approach of the moon. Presently it soared up above the trees that lined the rim of the gorge and the world was filled with a light as bright as moonlight can be only in the tropics. The enemy bivouac was in plain view. Seven soldiers lay round the small black spot that had been the camp fire. The eighth man was moving, sometimes walking a little way up and down on what seemed to be a regular beat, sometimes resting by sitting on a rock which apparently he had put in position near the sleepers for that purpose. Mr. Poo still sat in the same place, and in exactly the same posture, as when Biggles had last seen him. His beard, catching the moonlight, shone with a curious and conspicuous whiteness.

Hamid began to move. "Wait," he breathed.

"Shall we come a little closer, in case there is an alarm, to cover your retreat?" suggested Biggles.

"If you wish. But make no noise, sahib." The Gurkha drew his *kukri* from its sheath and began inching his way forward down the slope.

Biggles and Bertie gave him two or three minutes' start and then followed, slowly, taking infinite pains not to make the slightest sound. Once in a while Biggles stopped to survey the scene ahead for Hamid, but could not see him. He might, for any sign there was of him, have fallen into a hole in the ground. In the enemy camp everything remained unchanged. The sentry, his rifle slung on a shoulder, strolled up and down, or sat on his rock, anything to kill time.

Near the bottom of the *nullah*, behind a small, thin patch of scrub, through which it was possible to see without being seen, Biggles stopped and laid a hand on Bertie's arm. "This is close enough," he breathed, sinking down, with his rifle, resting on his knees, pointing forward.

There was still no sign of Hamid, although this was to be expected. The silence, except when the sentry displaced a pebble, seemed to be dropping from the sky.

Time passed. It might have been an hour, although to the watchers, with muscles becoming cramped, keyed up and expecting something to happen at any moment, it seemed like two or three. Hamid had given no indication of what he intended to do. He may not have known himself, his actions depending on circumstances. Biggles stared at the prone figures, and Mr. Poo, who still had not moved and but for his white beard might have been a graven image, until his eyes ached and he had to close them to clear his vision.

Just when Hamid went into action he did not know. He never did know. There was no sound. No abrupt movement. Nothing. The first thing he knew was that the sentry, who had been sitting on his rock, was no longer there. Nor was he walking up and down. Biggles blinked and looked again. An object that might have been a reptile was gliding slowly towards the sleepers. Realizing what it was he held his breath. He saw it reach Mr. Poo. The old

man turned his head sharply, and in another moment two figures were creeping quickly towards the nearest scrub on the far side of the *nullah*. Into it they disappeared. There had been no sound. Nothing had changed, except that Mr. Poo was no longer where he had been.

Bertie nudged Biggles to indicate that he had seen.

Biggles did not move. Neither did the sleepers.

Another long wait followed. Hamid did not reappear. The sentry had vanished. Biggles brushed drops of perspiration, brought on by heat and strain, from his eyelids. Time crawled on. It seemed interminable, and Biggles was beginning to get worried when a soft sound came from just above. Hamid's lithe body materialized in the gloom. He was alone.

Biggles joined him. "You've got him?"

"Yes, sahib."

"Great work. He knows you, of course."

"Yes, sahib."

"Take him to the others. We'll follow. We'd better wait here for a little while in case he can't travel very fast. The Chinese may wake, and missing him, start shooting."

"Yes, sahib."

Hamid retired, and Biggles and Bertie resumed their watching positions.

"That was a pretty piece of work," commented Bertie.

"Gurkhas are wizards at that sort of thing. Ask anyone who has served with them."

"What became of the sentry?"

"It may be better not to know. I fancy the last time he sat on that rock Hamid was already behind it and got him from the rear. It doesn't matter. I shan't shed any tears over him."

"The others are still asleep."

"They'll probably go on sleeping until the man detailed to relieve the sentry comes on duty. He probably expects to be awakened by the first guard; as that isn't likely to happen the whole bunch may go on sleeping till daylight."

That this did not happen was due to the arrival on the stage of an unexpected actor in the shape of a bear that came grumbling down the *nullah*. It may have been the mother of the cub that had been killed or it could have been one of those driven from its lair by smoke, now returning.

Biggles and Bertie, retiring slowly up the slope, stopped to watch. The bear, seeing the Chinese, growled and rose up on its hind legs. It made off, but the sound had awakened one of the soldiers who, on seeing the bear, leapt to his feet with a yell. This, of course, roused the others, and for a minute, during which time the bear blundered up the burnt area to its cave, there was confusion.

"This is where, when they get over their fright, they'll miss Mr. Poo and the sentry," said Biggles.

This, inevitably, was so. The troops did not, of course, find their prisoner, but they soon found the sentry. At all events they carried a body from behind the rock to the dead camp fire, where, talking in low voices, they stood staring at it.

"That's given 'em something else to think about," murmured Bertie. "If they go on losing men at this rate they'll be like the Ten Little Nigger Boys."

"I'd say the officer in charge is more concerned with losing his prisoner than his men."

"I wonder what he'll do about it."

"We shall know when it gets daylight. But there's no need to stay here any longer. Mr. Poo should be with the others by now. Let's get back. Mr. Poo will be able to tell us what happened to that servant of his. He's been on my mind, thinking he may have been only wounded. As things were we could do nothing about it, but we may be able to, tomorrow, unless Mr. Poo knows for certain that he's dead."

"What's our next move, old boy?"

"I've told you, we can't move until we get some grub. This has been a good night's work, so let's leave it at that for the time being. By gosh! Am I tired."

Very soon they were back at the rendezvous, to find that Hamid and Mr. Poo were there, the Chinaman in earnest conversation with Captain Toxan. Biggles formally introduced himself and his friends.

Mr. Poo bowed. He looked even more frail than Biggles had expected, but he held himself proudly, and when he spoke it was in perfect English. Presently Biggles was to learn that he had finished his education at an English university.

"I have no words to express my gratitude for what you and Captain Toxan have done for me," said Mr. Poo.

"Let us not talk of that," returned Biggles. "We are not yet out of the wood—literally, as well as figuratively. You understand the position? We can't leave here until we have food for the journey. I hope it will arrive tomorrow."

"So Captain Toxan has explained to me. Having lost everything I possess, including my country, I am in no great hurry to go anywhere."

"What happened to your Thibetan friend?"

"He is dead. Those villains shot him before my eyes, for no purpose, since he had done them no wrong. We were standing in the dry river bed, near where the tent used to be."

"I'm sorry," was all Biggles could say. "Now I think it would be a good thing if we all had some sleep. If we keep quiet the men below are not likely to find us here, neither tonight nor tomorrow. They must realize by now that enemies, whom they will probably suppose to be Indians, are watching them; for which reason they will not dare to separate, but will almost certainly stay close together for fear of incurring further casualties. But we can talk about this tomorrow. How much food is there left, Ginger? I suppose you didn't

bring any with you?"

"No. Food was the last thing I was thinking of when I dropped in."

"How are you feeling now?"

"Fine."

"How about you, Toxan?"

"Not too bad."

"Good."

Ginger was going through the haversacks Biggles and Bertie had taken with them to the Gond village. They had, of course, brought them on to the *nullah*. He reported one tin of bully beef, and, for a rough guess, enough biscuits to go round two apiece.

"We'll save them for breakfast," decided Biggles. He smiled. "No use giving ourselves indigestion by over-eating just as we're going to bed. Let's turn in. I'm nearly dead on my feet."

Nothing more was said. Silence, the hot, sultry silence of a tropical night, fell.

CHAPTER XV



CHAPTER XV

A GOOD DAY'S WORK

THE following morning again saw a blazing sun sweep up into a sky of lapis lazuli as if there was no such thing in all the world as rain. The heat struck down with silent force, finding a way even into the jungle with lances of green light.

When Biggles awoke soon after daybreak the first thing he noticed was that Hamid was not there. Seeing Ginger sitting up he asked him where he was. Ginger said he had seen him creep away at the first grey streak of dawn and assumed he had gone down into the *nullah* to reconnoitre. This conjecture in due course turned out to be correct.

The sound of voices awoke everyone, so the last remaining food was distributed, Hamid's share being set aside. There was a little tea in Biggles' haversack but it was not used, as this would mean lighting a fire, the smoke of which might be seen by the enemy. They managed with water. Being tepid it was not very satisfying.

Biggles was beginning to get worried by Hamid's prolonged absence when the Gurkha strode in, explaining his absence by saying he had been watching the enemy troops.

"What are they doing?" asked Biggles.

"They are going, sahib."

"You mean, they are leaving the *nullah*?"

"I watched them leave."

"Did they look as if they were going home?"

"That I could not say, for I know not which way they came. All I know is that at dawn they arose, and marched up the *nullah* to the end. I waited for a while, but hearing no sound feel sure they have left this place."

"They'll be looking for food."

"Yes, sahib."

"As soon as our food arrives we'll move off, too," Biggles told the others. "Unfortunately that won't be for some time yet, but if the Chinese have gone we shall lose nothing by waiting. What about your rubies, Toxan?"

"What about them?"

"If the *nullah* is clear of the enemy there's no reason why we shouldn't collect them. You've been to enough trouble to get them. It will be something for someone to do while we wait for Bira Shah and Ram Shan to come back. Is there likely to be any difficulty in finding the stones?"

"None at all. They're only a few inches under the sand in what was the middle of my tent. They're in a tin. It should be possible to scratch them out with the fingers."

"I'll go and fetch them," offered Ginger. "I know the spot. It's no distance."

"Do you feel up to it?"

"I'm as right as rain now."

"All right. Take a rifle with you. Hamid had better go with you in case of accidents."

"Fair enough."

"Will you go, Hamid?"

"I will go."

"Then you might as well get on with it. Keep out of mischief, Ginger."

"I'm not looking for trouble," retorted Ginger.

Biggles took him a little aside. "There are two dead men, a Gurkha and a Thibetan, lying near Toxan's camp. I noticed a spade there. If you can, you might bury them."

"Okay. It shouldn't take long in the sand."

Ginger and Hamid moved off.

Biggles looked at Mr. Poo. "I believe you had some treasures you would like to save. I mean the jade."

"I implore you to go to no trouble."

"But these things are valuable."

"I am not concerned with their value in terms of money, but as they are some of the most beautiful objects made in my country in days gone by, it would, I admit, be a tragedy if they were lost for ever."

"Are they heavy?"

"No. They are small. The total weight would not be more than twenty pounds. But that was too much for me and my servant so we had to abandon them."

"How far is the place from here?"

"That I could not say. We came on down the hill, resting frequently, so it would be difficult to judge the distance. I can say, however, that they must be at an altitude of about ten thousand feet, which is where the tropical timber gives way to conifers, mostly firs. But please do not bother."

"We are at about eight thousand feet here so it would only mean a climb of two thousand. Say, two hours to get there and an hour to return. As I have said, there is nothing we can do until our food arrives. The trouble might be to find the stuff."

"That should not be very difficult. In the firs there is a tall, double pinnacle

of rock, conspicuous for a considerable distance. You can't mistake the twin points. You should see them from any open place. We left the bag, covered with a big mound of fir needles, at the base, on the lower side. We chose a spot that could easily again be found in case it was ever possible for us to return."

"Jade is brittle, I believe."

"Yes, and for that reason the articles were well packed with yaks' hair between them."

Biggles looked at Bertie. "Do you feel like coming with me to see what we can do about it? If we fail to find the bag we shall be no worse off than we are now."

"Suits me, old boy, absolutely. Anything is better than sitting here doing nothing."

Biggles got up. "Then let's have a shot at it." He looked at Mr. Poo. "As far as you know the fir forest is immediately above us?"

"Yes. After leaving the bag we came directly downhill, following an old game track, and so, in crossing this gorge, came upon the camp of Captain Toxan."

Biggles picked up his rifle. "Let's go. Let no one move from here until we come back. If we became separated we might find it difficult to get together again."

Later, when they were alone, he said: "I don't altogether like the idea of leaving Toxan and Poo, but I felt we should make an effort to get the old man's little treasures. It's about all he has left. But if the Chinese have gone it's unlikely they'll come back. Even if they did, and searched the place, Toxan and Poo should be all right if they sit quiet."

"The two Gonds will look after 'em. Ginger and Hamid won't be long away, anyhow."

At first the going was so difficult that Biggles began to doubt if they would succeed in reaching the objective. The jungle was thick and it was of course uphill all the way. They did not attempt to climb straight up, which would have taxed their endurance, but took a wide zigzag course, first one way and then the other, which, while it increased the actual distance to be covered, reduced the gradient of the climb. In doing this they struck a game track which they hoped was the one by which Mr. Poo had made the descent. A little while afterwards they had reason to think they were right, when, reaching a small, but fairly open rock plateau they saw, still some way in front of them, the dark green colour of what, from the unmistakable shape of the tops, were firs. From somewhere about the middle of the belt rose two pale grey splinters of rock.

"That must be it," said Biggles, and pushed on through the forest that was now steadily getting less dense, the result, of course, of altitude.

Half an hour later, after a final scramble over some loose shale, apparently a minor landslide, their feet were falling softly on a thick carpet of fir needles.

From below they had marked the relative position of the twin spires and now hastened towards them.

“Poo said the bag was on the bottom side so we shan’t have to climb round to the top,” remarked Biggles, as they reached the grey, waterworn rock, and continued on along the base.

They had not gone far when Biggles uttered a little cry, and stooping, picked up a small, green, beautifully carved figurine of a Chinese mandarin. He looked at Bertie with consternation written on his face. “Would you believe it! Somebody has found the *cache*,” he muttered.

“But here, I say, old boy, that’s fantastic. Who would come here?”

Biggles shook his head. “Don’t ask me.” He hurried on.

Presently they came to what had obviously been the mound of fir needles thrown up by Mr. Poo and his companion. That it had only recently been disturbed was evident from the darker colour of the damp needles. Scattered around it were the jade ornaments, blue, yellow and green. The bag that had contained them, torn open, lay near, with tufts of the yak hair that had been used for packing.

Bertie adjusted his monocle. “What on earth has someone been playing at?” he demanded, in a voice stiff with astonishment.

Biggles was already gathering up the pieces of jade. “Monkeys,” he said laconically. “We were only just in time. There’s one of the little blighters now, on the rock, watching us. They must have seen the mound, and finding the bag imagined it contained food of some sort. Finding only stones, and having no appreciation of art, they had no further interest. They may have watched the stuff being buried, in which case, being inquisitive little rascals, as soon as Mr. Poo had gone they’d investigate. Anyway, it’s a good thing we came along. If no one else had found the stuff it would have been covered by the next fall of fir needles and never seen again. I think we’ve got the lot. I can’t see any more.”

The pieces, carefully wrapped in yak hair, were returned to the bag, but as this had been torn open, with no way of mending it properly, it made an awkward parcel. Biggles closed the rent as well as he could by lacing it roughly with the hem of his shirt, using his knife to make the holes. This done they set off on the return journey.

Being downhill they were able to cover the ground a good deal faster than had been possible on the way up, and in rather less than an hour they were back at the rendezvous to find the party complete. Ginger and Hamid had recovered the rubies. Toxan was showing them to Ginger. Being uncut, of course, they did not look very exciting, although Toxan seemed to think so.

Bira Shah, Mata Dhinn and Ram Shan were also there, apparently having only just arrived, for their loads had not yet been unpacked. Mr. Poo uttered a cry of joy when he saw the bag Bertie was carrying; but Biggles was more concerned with other matters.

“You made good time,” he said, looking at Bira Shah. “I didn’t expect you

back until nightfall.”

“We find good elephant track, sahib. Go straight to lake of blue water.”

“Did you see anything of the Chinese?”

“No. Once we hear gunshot far away, but no see.”

“It could have been them shooting something for food,” opined Biggles.

“Did you tell the sahib at the lake what had happened here?”

“Tell all. When we arrive he is much troubled. Seeing only Chinese here last time he flies over he knows not what to do.”

“You told him we would start back as soon as we had food for the journey, which, as we cannot travel fast, might take two or three days?”

“This I told him, sahib. He waits.”

“Good. You have done well.”

“We all seem to have done well,” put in Toxan, to whom the sight of his precious rubies seemed to have worked wonders. Mr. Poo, too, busy with his jade, also appeared to have taken a new lease of life.

“When are you thinking of starting?” asked Ginger.

“I see no reason why we shouldn’t start right away. There’s nothing more for us to do here. We still have a few hours of daylight left and we may as well use them. Whatever we do we shall have to spend at least one night in the jungle so I don’t see that it matters much if we have to pass two or three nights in it. The sooner we’re back at the lake the better.”

Everyone agreed.

“We might as well have a good tuck in before we start,” went on Biggles, smiling. “It’s easier to carry food in one’s inside than in a bag on one’s back. I’m pretty peckish, anyway.”

“I refilled the water bottles when I went down for the rubies,” said Ginger. Softly, to Biggles, he added: “We also did the other job you mentioned.”

“Good. Then we’re all set.”

The bags were emptied, and it was seen that Algy was determined they should not run short of food. He had sent them a good supply of biscuits, tins of ham, bully beef, sardines and a pot of jam. He had also included tea, sugar and condensed milk.

“I think we might risk a pot of tea,” said Biggles. “If only dry stuff is used for the fire it won’t make much smoke; and if by this time those confounded Chinese are deep in the jungle they wouldn’t be able to see a volcano. How far is it to this old elephant track you mentioned, Bira Shah?”

“We should get there by the time darkness falls.”

“You’re sure you can find your way to it again?”

The Gond looked pained. “I am a hunter, sahib,” he said, reproachfully. “I do not lose my way.”

The food was distributed and a satisfying meal, which included strong sweet tea, was had by all.

“For energy, when you most need it, there’s nothing to beat tea with plenty of sugar in it,” declared Biggles. “It gets you pretty warm in a hot climate but

it keeps you going when you begin to sag. You get hot, anyway.”

The meal finished, preparations for the march were soon made. The unconsumed food was replaced in the bags; Toxan was lifted on to the stretcher, which was to be carried by four of the five Gonds, the odd man taking his turn at intervals. Biggles organized the order of march thus: Bira Shah, their guide, would lead. He would be followed by Hamid Khan, who, with his *kukri*, would clear the way should it be necessary. Biggles, with his rifle came next. Then came the stretcher, Mr. Poo walking beside it, with Ginger to help him over awkward places. Bertie, with Toxan's rifle, brought up the rear.

This was the line as the party set off, keeping close to the rim of the *nullah* where the undergrowth was not as dense as in the jungle proper.

Progress was necessarily slow, but there were few halts, and these only brief, wherefore, as Bira Shah had promised, nightfall found them in the open, much-trampled track, made by wild elephants in their quest for food and water.

Here the party stopped and settled down to pass the night.

CHAPTER XVI



CHAPTER XVI

THE FINAL SHOCK

THE march was continued, after a quick breakfast, at the dawn of what was obviously going to be another blazing day. The Gonds carrying the stretcher were wonderful. Far from making any complaint they seemed proud of the task that had been allotted to them. Mr. Poo stood up to the journey better than his frail appearance would have led anyone to expect. The recovery of his little treasure may have lent strength to his old limbs. Ginger, still taking his medicine regularly, had no recurrence of fever.

The going on the elephant track was of course less arduous, but that is not to say it was easy, particularly in wet places where the soft earth had been trampled into a bog. But, against that, the elephants, forest-wise, had an unerring instinct for taking the best way round obstacles. Biggles kept the time by his watch, and being aware that a forced march could sometimes defeat its object, called for a ten minute halt and rest every hour.

At such times one of the Indians would usually scout ahead, for while nothing had been seen or heard of the enemy invaders their existence was not forgotten. In fact, although he did not reveal his anxiety, Biggles thought about them a lot, wondering where they had gone, and realizing that as they, too, would probably follow a game track, there was always a chance they might be on the same one as themselves; in which case they would come into collision. In the event, however, this did not happen, and while good progress was made, fading daylight made it evident that they would have to pass

another night in the jungle. Everyone was cheered when Bira Shah said they were now close to the lake and would reach it early the following morning. Biggles was for pushing on, but the Gond insisted it would be unwise to travel, or try to travel, through the jungle in the pitch dark. Even when the moon rose little light would penetrate the heavy foliage of the trees. In his heart Biggles knew he was right.

So more rations were issued and another night was passed in the forest. Biggles explained to their Indian friends what he intended to do when the lake was reached. There they would have to part. He would have to fly Toxan sahib to hospital and would not come back. Would they, with food, be able to find their way home? The Indians assured them there would be no difficulty about this; but they were sad, they said, having had such good hunting together, that the time for parting was near. Biggles pressed on them most of the money, in rupees, he had in his pocket, and said they could have the tent and anything left in it when they flew away.

It was barely daylight when, the next morning, the party set off on the last stage of the journey. Naturally, everyone—except perhaps the Indians—was agog to see the end of what had been a strenuous operation in conditions that were both hot and difficult. When blue sky appeared ahead the pace increased as everyone hurried forward to gaze once more on open ground—or to be more correct, water.

Bira Shah, still leading, was the first to reach it. The others saw him look, stare, duck, and hurry back, holding up a warning hand.

“What is it?” asked Biggles, quickly.

“The Chinese, sahib. They are at your camp.”

Biggles spun round. “Halt, everyone,” he ordered. “Don’t try to see or you may be seen.” Then, with Bira Shah and Hamid he crept forward to the edge of the lake to survey the scene.

He saw at once that they had reached the water some distance, perhaps a quarter of a mile, from the actual site of the tent. He had never been to the particular spot on which he now stood, having no reason to do so. The tent, with the aircraft moored near it, was in plain view across the open water. Standing in a group near it were the Chinese soldiers.

“What are they doing?” asked Ginger, looking very worried indeed, as he had reason to be.

“Nothing at the moment, except that they appear to be trying to carry on a hand-signal conversation with Algy. I don’t think they can have been there very long.”

“I say, old boy, this is a bit of a bone-shaker, isn’t it?” said Bertie, earnestly.

“It may not be as bad as it looks.”

“It couldn’t look much worse to me. What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to fetch the aircraft and bring it over here.”

“You and who else?”

"No one else. This job will be best handled solo. Here, take my rifle."

"You're going without it?" Bertie looked dumbfounded.

"I am. I shan't need it. What could I do with it, anyway, against that lot, if they did cut up rough? I think the whole situation has got them foxed. Having seen the machine over the *nullah* they must have a feeling it is in some way concerned with them, but they don't know how, which isn't hard to understand. Of course, if they saw Mr. Poo with us it would be a different proposition. But we're wasting time. Take over and don't on any account let anyone show himself. Be ready to get aboard smartly when I arrive."

"What about the tent. Are you going to abandon it?"

"I am. There's nothing in it of any value. Most of our stuff is in the machine. Stand by." Saying goodbye Biggles shook hands with the Indians who had been so helpful and strode away along the side of the lake. He made no attempt to conceal himself. On the contrary, he struck up a cheerful whistle to make sure everyone near the machine saw him, the purpose of this being to give the Chinese something else to think about and so cause them to delay hostilities if they were so inclined.

In this he succeeded. At all events, the troops did nothing, and when he strolled into the camp, looking as if he had merely been for a walk round the lake, they stared at him with blank, bovine expressions. He went on past them as if they did not exist and greeted Algy as if nothing unusual was happening.

"Am I glad to see you," muttered Algy.

"What are these chaps doing?"

"So far they've done nothing. I fancy they need food. They keep looking around as if they're wondering if I'm alone, and why. Did you know they were here?"

"Of course."

"Then why come by yourself, without a rifle?"

"It's better that way. It wouldn't do to let 'em think we're afraid of them."

"Where are the others?"

"At the far end of the lake."

"Poo with them?"

"He is."

"What's the drill?"

"I'm going to take the machine over and pick them up."

"Do you think they'll let you do that?"

"I'm going to try it. I'd bet it doesn't occur to them that we're going to abandon the tent. Watch this for another line of bluff."

Biggles turned back to the Chinese and with raised eyebrows pointed to his mouth, unmistakably asking if they wanted food.

The leader began to take interest and signified assent.

Said Biggles to Algy: "Okay. Pull the machine in and bring out a box of biscuits. Don't come ashore yourself. Hand them to me, cast off and then get into the cockpit ready to start up."

“I get it.”

The Chinese did not move as Algy hauled the machine close in, went aboard and reappeared with a large tin of biscuits. Biggles took it and handed it to the leader who tore off the lid to see what was inside. With all eyes on the box it was unlikely that anyone saw Algy slip his cable; and if anyone did notice this it obviously had no significance.

With the Chinese leader doling out the biscuits, without any show of haste Biggles walked to the aircraft, entered it by the cabin door and called to Algy: “Okay. Let her go.”

The enemy troops stopped what they were doing to stare at the machine as the engines came to life. They did not move. As Biggles had anticipated it is likely that with the tent still standing it did not occur to them that the aircraft, now moving, was not coming back.

Biggles joined Algy in the cockpit. “I’ll take over; I know where they are,” he said. In the reflector he could see the Chinese still standing in the same place, watching as they munched their biscuits.

“You’ve got a nerve,” Algy told Biggles, in a curious voice.

Biggles grinned. “Nothing to it. Our yellow friends haven’t a clue as to what we’re up to, but they’ll come to with a jolt when they see the others getting aboard.”

“We shall still be in range.”

“Pretty wide for accurate shooting even for people who can handle a rifle. From the way those chaps handle their arms I’d wager they couldn’t hit a haystack at a hundred yards.”

Biggles was still taxiing slowly over the tranquil water. There was of course no necessity to take off. Only when he was level with those waiting for him did he give the engines a little more throttle and swing towards the shore. Close in he turned again to bring the aircraft broadside on, both to have the cabin door on the right side and in the hope of preventing the enemy from seeing what was happening, their view of the shore being cut off by the hull.

Algy jumped out into a couple of feet of water shouting “Come on.”

With everyone waiting no second invitation was necessary. Toxan, on his improvised stretcher, was carried in first and settled on the floor as comfortable as circumstances permitted. His rifle, he told Biggles, he had given to Hamid for a present. Mr. Poo came next and was found a seat. The rest followed. Goodbyes were called. Under Biggles’ orders Bertie threw to those remaining ashore all the foodstuffs left in the machine.

By this time the troops, if they didn’t realize exactly what was happening must have become suspicious that they were in some way being tricked, for they were coming along the border of the lake at the double. Observing this Biggles shouted a warning to the Indians, who had of course remained ashore, telling them to make themselves scarce or the Chinese would catch them.

“Not in my own jungle, sahib,” answered Bira Shah.

Hamid fingered the edge of his *kukri*, his lips parted in a mirthless smile.

“Better get going,” said Algy, for some of the Chinese had stopped and were shooting; but they had been running and their aim was wild, as was indicated by little spurts of water, none of them close to the machine. However, it was clearly time to be off. Ginger slammed the door. Biggles advanced the throttle. The machine raced across the surface of the blue lake for the last time and swept into the air on the first leg of its journey home, two hundred miles to Delhi.

There, while the aircraft was being refuelled, Captain Toxan was put off to go into hospital for treatment, the reason for his condition, the authorities were told, being a shooting accident, which was as near the truth as made no difference. The home-made stretcher supported the story. He left his rubies in Biggles’ charge, saying he would collect them when he was well enough to return to Britain. This saved explanations that might have been difficult.

* * *

That, really, was the end of Biggles’ brief visit to the country in which he had been born, for the rest was straightforward routine. On arrival in Britain the rubies and Mr. Poo’s jade, being dutiable, were left with the Customs for valuation, the way being smoothed by Biggles’ official position.

From the airport, taking Mr. Poo with them, they went by car to their London flat, where before doing anything else Biggles called Air Commodore Raymond at Scotland Yard on the telephone.

“Bigglesworth here, sir,” he reported. “I thought you’d like to know we’re home. Yes, we have Mr. Poo with us. We brought him here pending you finding accommodation for him. Trouble? No trouble at all, sir. Right away. Okay, sir.” He smiled as he hung up. “The Chief’s coming straight round,” he told the others.

“Excuse me, but did I hear you say there had been no trouble?” inquired Mr. Poo.

“You may have done. What else would I say? Why bore people with details that are of no importance. You’re here, that’s all that matters.”

Mr. Poo shook his head, gravely. “What strange people you are,” he murmured.

“Well, I suppose that’s how we happen to be made,” returned Biggles, reaching for a cigarette.

THE END